



Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland
Bishop Emeritus
Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

Statement of the
Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland Bishop of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph
on the
Passing of Pope John Paul II
(1920 ~ 2005)

(Kansas City , MO / April 2, 2005) Appraisals of Pope John Paul II during the week of his death do him a disservice. The influence of such a long pontificate will live on long after his body is laid to rest in the crypt of St. Peter's. It is easy to dwell on the obvious. This first Polish Pope was the most traveled pontiff in the history of the papacy. His ministry of presence enkindled hope in the hearts of millions. Inexplicably, young people revered him and continued to do so even when age and illness bowed his shoulders and muffled his voice. Much will be conjectured about his role in international politics. No doubt it has been exaggerated by some but it was considerable. The Communist empire would have eventually toppled but I would suggest that the Holy Father hastened the inevitability. The Communists made a critical mistake when they allowed Karol Wojtyla to return to his native heath. They were also losers when Mehmet Ali Agca failed in his attempt to assassinate the Pope.

The role of John Paul II in the implementation of the decisions of the Second Vatican Council cannot be understated. The Council was a watershed event for the Church and like all such seismic occurrences it generated much unanimity along with its share of competing viewpoints. Councils are not isolated historical events complete unto themselves. It is what they set in motion that is important. The momentum for change almost unanimously mandated by the Council Fathers needed a strong guiding hand if a steady course between anarchy and retrenchment was to be maintained. The Cardinals in the second Conclave of 1978 handed that task to Karol Wojtyla. He had been an active and creative participant within the Council. He knew its expectations and its shortcomings and the Cardinals not only appreciated this but they also trusted his pastoral judgment and leadership abilities.

His mentor, Cardinal Wyszynski of Warsaw had prophetically encouraged his fellow archbishop on October 16, 1978, the day the white smoke billowed from the Sistine Chapel, to

accept his election in order to lead the Church into the new millennium. It has not been easy. Given the turmoil of society these past twenty-five years and the second-guessing of his critics, many of whom played no role in the Council deliberations and often are allied with those who reject Church teachings, I still believe that history will conclude that John Paul II was the right man for the job at the right time. His successor will be viewing the challenge from a slightly different perspective but the job description he will receive from the electors within these coming weeks will be as daunting as that given to Peter centuries ago by the Galilean seashore. Eden didn't last very long. The Church exists because of the tension between grace and sin and that adversarial relationship is still alive and well as we stumble along in this third Christian Millennium.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of John Paul II was his unrelenting insistence on the preeminent dignity of the human person. The concept permeates all his papal messages, oral and written. The theologian Pope has no difficulty in his enrichment of this principle by the use of the sacred scriptures, an exposition of significant value for people of faith. But, as a citizen of the world, the philosopher Pope offers to all humankind, believers and non-believers, the same foundation as the essential basis for all law. No doubt this conviction was honed and colored by the repressive regime which he was forced to endure as a young priest and bishop. On a global level the Holy Father readily discovered the roots of genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, economic exploitation and religious persecution in the denial of the dignity of the human person. Giving a priority to human dignity in the roster of our values has implications for many of the moral questions which disturb the body politic and haunt our individual lives. The Pope not only taught that it is wrong to violate the dignity of another human being but he also insisted that we have an obligation to promote the total fulfillment of human potential. Therein lies the challenge which John Paul II left to us. This pope, poet, pilgrim and preacher was a man for our times. He was honored by many and, strange as it may seem, even those who disagreed with him on every issue, respected him. His years have ended. His last and finest pilgrimage has just begun.