John Paul put one step below sainthood

by [Francis X. Rocca](#)
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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The late Pope John Paul II, who elevated unprecedented numbers of Catholic saints and blesseds during his 26-year reign, joined those ranks himself on Sunday (May 1), when he was beatified before a crowd of more than a million pilgrims.

Pope Benedict XVI declared his predecessor "blessed" -- the church's highest honor short of sainthood -- to cheers and applause from the crowds filling St. Peter's Square and the broad avenue beyond.

A tapestry bearing a photographic image of John Paul was unveiled on the main facade of St. Peter's Basilica as a warm spring sun broke through the city's unseasonably cold and rainy weather. Ebullient pilgrims waved flags and banners with the red and white stripes of John Paul's native Poland, chanting his signature phrase, "Be not afraid!"

"As we approached the square in the morning, we could hear the singing, and I got a lump in my throat," said Mary Bruton Reid, an American living in London, who said she journeyed to Rome because "John Paul meant a lot to me" and helped inspire her return to the church.

A silver reliquary containing a vial of John Paul's blood was displayed to the crowd, carried by two nuns: Sister Tobiana, who served in the papal residence during John Paul's reign; and Sister Marie Simon-Pierre Normand, who church officials say was healed of Parkinson's disease in 2005 after praying to the late pontiff for his intercession.

A second church-certified miracle, occurring after Sunday's ceremony, will be required before John Paul can be canonized as a saint.

Church officials hailed John Paul for staring down and ultimately outliving communism; Cardinal Agostino Vallini, the vicar (or acting bishop) of Rome, said John Paul was beloved by the church but "was also feared by those who regarded him as an adversary."

In his homily, Benedict alluded to John Paul's struggle to undermine communism in his native Poland, which started in the late 1970s when he became an icon for the country's free labor movement, Solidarity.

The late pope "opened up society, culture, political and economic systems to Christ," Benedict said, "turning back with the strength of a titan -- a strength which came to him from God -- a tide which seemed irreversible."

John Paul's beatification is one of the fastest in modern times, coming just six years after his death. Benedict said he chose to act with "reasonable haste," waiving the normal five-year waiting period, because John Paul already exuded the "fragrance of sanctity" when he died in 2005.

John Paul himself had approved the canonizations of 482 saints and 1341 beatifications -- more than all his predecessors combined. During his 2005 funeral, crowds erupted in spontaneous shouts of "santo subito," Italian for "a saint at once."

Advocates for victims of clergy sex abuse have objected to Sunday's honor, arguing the late pope failed to stop the problem and even favored the late Rev. Marcial Maciel, founder of the Legion of Christ, after Maciel was accurately accused of sex abuse.

Following Sunday's beatification Mass, which lasted nearly three hours, Benedict led a procession of cardinals into the basilica for a moment of homage before John Paul's exhumed casket, which had been placed before the main altar.

The faithful later lined up to pay their own respects to John Paul's remains, in a process that was expected to last late into the night. On Monday evening, the casket will be moved to its new permanent home in the basilica's chapel of St. Sebastian, near Michelangelo's famed sculpture of the Pieta.