Papal witness: A philosopher pope in a media age

by Robin Lovin in the April 19, 2005 issue

Pope John Paul II, the “pilgrim pope,” understood intuitively that his ancient office was perfectly suited to reach a global audience in a media age. He gave peace, justice and human dignity a personal face that was somehow perfectly suited to the times, while reminding people that those values are older and more permanent than the institutions of modern politics.

Presidents and prime ministers in sober, dark suits waited nervously for a word with the genial pastor in a white cassock because they understood that this pope could speak directly to their constituents in words that made a difference. In a nice variation on the fable about the emperor’s new clothes, an old man whose costume was medieval told the powers that ruled the world that they were naked, and all the people began to laugh.

John Paul II was also the “philosopher pope.” He changed the intellectual terms of engagement between faith and the modern world. For a century and more, progressive voices in Christianity had called for greater theological responsiveness to modern thought. In the process, a good deal of extraneous baggage was jettisoned, and theologians became more adept at distinguishing Christian proclamation from shifting historical patterns of expression. By the 1970s, however, even liberal Protestants had begun to ask whether the forms of modern thought were setting limits on the proclamation rather than providing a voice for it.

Karol Wojtyla, whose studies in phenomenology shaped his concept of the human person living in solidarity with others, knew how to use philosophy to make the gospel comprehensible in the modern world. But he also understood that the reality of God at the beginning and end of history will always transcend the limits of human reason and limit the ambitions of human morality.

John Paul II rejected the demands of an adolescent modernity that insisted on having every truth reformulated in its own terms, and he could be harsh in dealing with

theologians who seemed to him to be catering to modern whims. A world that has truly “come of age” is a world that has encountered some of its own limitations.

John Paul II dealt tenderly with that world’s wounded aspirations, teaching it that suffering can be redemptive and offering it a realistic vision of what a passion for peace and justice might yet accomplish. In a way, he honored the modern world with the assumption that it was mature enough to hear the gospel on the gospel’s own terms, no longer requiring simplified versions edited to avoid shocking modern sensibilities. All of us, in every tradition, who try to preach the gospel do it differently because of the possibilities that John Paul II demonstrated.

As the pope embodied and proclaimed the truths of Christian faith, he sometimes seemed less adept at strategy. Perhaps he did not see strategizing as central to his office. He understood the variety of the world better than any previous pontiff, but he knew that his teaching had to transcend that diversity in order to speak to all of it. Strategy was for him a task of what Roman Catholics call the “local” church, the bishops and pastors in a particular social, economic and political context.

As a bishop, Wojtyla was a brilliant strategist for the church in communist Poland, and as pope he did much to hasten the transformation of Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Latin America, however, he rejected the strategy of liberation theology, which used Marxist economics in service to movements of solidarity. Marxism was in his mind essentially tied to oppression, and its concern for the material conditions of progress seemed to compromise spiritual truth.

As for the church in North America, the pope who had known political oppression had perhaps too little sympathy for the pastoral needs that go with freedom and affluence. He did not appreciate the demands for hierarchical accountability and lay participation that grew louder following the clergy abuse scandals. He could not admit the possibility that the place of women and married men in the ministry of his church reflected ancient strategic choices elevated to the level of universal truths.

The next pope will inherit a church and a world very different from those that Wojtyla knew when he entered the conclave in 1978. Christian unity and interreligious cooperation have become even more urgent as a result of the political changes of the past two decades. Christian life in Africa and in China will, by sheer force of numbers, raise questions for all denominations that none of them have yet faced. Many strategies of the long papacy of John Paul II will take their place in history, to await further evaluation. What endures is a witness to the power of

Christian faith when taken on its own terms—a witness that is more powerful than we could have imagined without him.