

John Paul II leaves transformed papacy: The people's pope

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

In September of 1987 near the historic San Fernando Mission in Los Angeles, Pope John Paul II held his first face-to-face meeting with the entire U.S. hierarchy. He dealt bluntly with the “selective” dissent of many American Catholics over church teachings on sexual policies, women’s equality and church authority.

One nationwide poll had found that U.S. Catholics by a ten-to-one margin believed they could disagree with the church and still be considered loyal followers. But the pope, then nine years into his papacy, told the 300 bishops that such dissent was “a grave error” that challenged the teaching authority of bishops and the Vatican alike.

The Polish pontiff reiterated his opposition to ordination of women, divorce and remarriage, abortion and homosexual behavior. Yet he did not prescribe penalties for disobedient Catholics. He urged bishops to “attract assent” through education and a new effort at evangelization “directed to the mind.”

Even if John Paul himself did not make those issues go away for U.S. Catholics, he often pushed them to the back burner by his charisma and dynamism. Using television and his travels to endear himself to the world, the multilingual “people’s pope” consistently opposed communism and war, defended the poor and displaced, and opened new interfaith doors, including the start of diplomatic relations with Israel.

By the time of his April 2 death at his Vatican apartment, the 84-year-old leader of the world’s 1 billion Catholics had won lasting admiration for his service through pain, weakened as he was for more than a decade by Parkinson’s disease. The pope will be remembered “as one of the most courageous spiritual leaders of our time,” said Samuel Kobia, an African and Methodist who is general secretary of the World Council of Churches.

After several days of mourning, a Vatican conclave of 117 cardinals, all but three of whom were appointed by John Paul II, will choose a successor. While observers debated whether the new pope will play an “interim” role, and whether he will be from Italy rather than the developing world, most were at least certain that he would be a theological and moral conservative.

Will the next pope be as determined to centralize authority at the Vatican as John Paul was? That was an issue for some U.S. bishops back in 1987. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, one of four archbishops to describe the “anxiety” and “pain” of American Catholics, had emphasized to John Paul that the pope and bishops must cooperate closely in carrying out their “distinct but complementary responsibilities” and to “be able to speak with one another in complete candor, without fear.”

That feeling may be just as true today. “However loyal cardinals may be to the pope who created them, they are liberated by his death, free to make a fresh start,” said the late Peter Hebblethwaite, the longtime Vatican correspondent and author, when contemplating this inevitable conclave. The cardinals “do not necessarily vote for someone in the same mold.”

Another reporter-author, David Gibson, writing recently for Beliefnet.com and Religion News Service, suggested that “trumping all issues” during the closed meeting will be a debate over increasing centralization of papal authority.

“Enforcing liturgical rules, disciplining theologians or reviewing diocesan finances are among the oft-cited examples of this style,” Gibson said, adding that the papacy was also centralized by John Paul’s charisma. “Through his travels and his actor’s gift for communicating, John Paul—and the papacy—became identified with ‘the church,’ a tendency that cardinals on all sides have grown weary of.”

Gibson said that many hope the next pope “will allow the bishops to operate—even experiment—more freely according to their own needs,” such as using lay preachers in limited circumstances in Switzerland and applying specific rules on sexual abuse for the U.S. church. “German Cardinal Walter Kasper, a member of the Vatican bureaucracy, is in favor of a more ‘collegial’ approach—that is, one that fosters dialogue and collaboration with Rome.”

Sociologist-priest Andrew Greeley, also writing for Beliefnet, opined that the “next pope, who may well be chosen because he is seen as a ‘healer,’ will have a very difficult time and will risk being torn apart by the centripetal energies in the church.”