

Pope John Paul II, 1920–2005, A Genius of the Human Gesture  
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It is an understatement to say that Pope John Paul II mastered the media. No one could question the appropriateness of the “John Paul Superstar” epithet that once headlined the cover of *Time* magazine. It is no surprise that the death of the third-longest-reigning pontiff in history evokes a number of familiar images that reveal much about his personality and his legacy. This pope may be remembered more for his powerful symbolic gestures than his doctrinal pronouncements.

John Paul II wagging a scolding finger at the kneeling Rev. Ernesto Cardenal, the minister of culture in Nicaragua’s then-new Sandinista government, accurately captured this pope’s suspicions of left-leaning political reform movements in Latin America during the 1970s and ’80s. People did not need to read the documents of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to understand that the pope had serious reservations with liberation theology.

John Paul II embracing AIDS patients at San Francisco’s Mission Dolores at a time when many religious leaders were teaching that AIDS expressed God’s anger at homosexuals reflected the tireless efforts of the pontiff to bear witness to God’s unconditional love for all. Those who are dispirited by the harsh tone of the Vatican’s statements on sexuality may find encouragement in recalling this dramatic expression of papal acceptance and support.

A sombrero-clad John Paul II taking an indigenous Mexican child up into his arms testified to the pope’s unrelenting efforts to show the developing world the misery and sufferings of the peoples in so-called Third World countries. The pope responded to uncritical advocates of the free market with stinging critiques of the absolute primacy of marketplace laws over the needs of the poor. His complete rejection of atheistic communism did not turn him into an apologist for unbridled capitalism.

John Paul II reaching out to shake the hand of Mehmet Ali Agca—the same hand that shot and nearly killed him during a 1981 motorcade in St. Peter’s square—spoke powerfully about reconciliation between victim and perpetrator. This pope underscored the necessity for judicial and penal procedures that protect society against violent criminals rather than exact retribution by executing criminals.

John Paul II espoused a seamless ethic of life with an integrity and consistency that would be a welcome addition to national debates in this country. He spoke with equal vigor in condemning abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment and both Iraq wars.

Those who are troubled by what they consider the Vatican’s overly zealous efforts to preserve a privileged status for Roman Catholicism among the world’s religions may temper their anxiety with pictures of him gathered with leaders of all the world’s great

religions at Assisi, placing a prayer of atonement into a crack in Jerusalem's Wailing Wall, visiting a mosque in Syria and kissing the Koran, welcoming the Dalai Lama at a private audience in the Vatican or enfolding the Chief Rabbi of Rome in his arms.

While John Paul II's tenure has been marked by an increasing centralization of authority in the Vatican—most evident in Rome's minute and detailed prescriptions for the liturgy—the pope himself presided over masses where Indian women purified the portals of St. Peter with rose water; African tribesmen signaled the entry procession with horns made of elephant tusks; indigenous people revered the altar with smoking bowls of copal incense; and Pacific Islanders danced their prayer in traditional garb of feathers, beads and woven grasses. If the Vatican has made every effort to standardize Catholic liturgical practice throughout the world, this pope's public celebrations have welcomed richly varied cultural expressions of faith.

John Paul II probably racked up more frequent-flier miles than any person in history in the course of his lifelong pilgrimage to nearly 130 countries. His exhausting travel schedule spoke eloquently of his commitment to promoting global awareness and understanding among the family of nations. John Paul II was the head of the Catholic Church, but he took his role as a citizen of the world with equal seriousness; the world would be better served if all of its leaders did likewise.

John Paul II's reach far exceeded his grasp. While his governing authority was limited to the Catholic Church, his heart opened to the entire world. He, more than any single individual of modern times, responded to the call of the Second Vatican Council for Catholics to take on the "joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially of those who are poor or in any way afflicted." This pope personified the council's concern in his powerfully captivating gestures, and thereby moved the minds and hearts of people everywhere. He changed this world for the better.