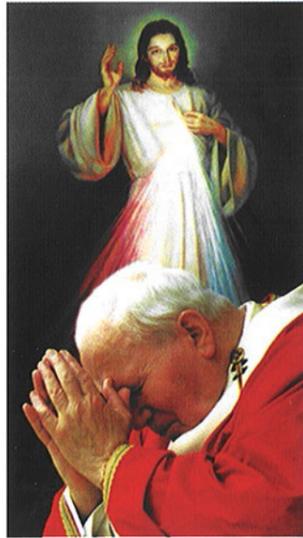




Throughout the years, this deep seated, passionate and at the same time deeply intellectual love of Christ would express itself in tangible acts of faith, of fervent piety and heartfelt considerations such as those found near the very end of his life in his two letters on the Eucharist.

How could one fail to call attention to that other overriding love in the heart of this man, priest and pontiff: love for the Mother of Christ. His two favourite exclamations of prayer were "Praised be Jesus Christ" and "Totus tuus", the latter a proclamation to the Virgin Mary he had made long ago, following the recommendation of St Louis-Marie de Montfort, to be "entirely yours." This was the Pope who would take every advantage of the little time he had between appointments and commitments to thumb the beads of the Rosary, invoking the intercession of Mary for himself and for one and all.

Is it not significant that the day chosen for his beatification brings together his great loves and concerns? The first of May 2011 is Divine Mercy Sunday, a feast he himself instituted, and it was on the eve of that feast that he finally went to God. It is also the feast of St Joseph the Worker, a feast established by Pope Pius XI to promote the Christian understanding of the value of work and the worker. Finally, it is the day that inaugurates the month traditionally dedicated to the Mother of God. The Church will rejoice greatly on that day and always thereafter in the memory and intercession of this great son of Mary.



A great legacy

Pope John Paul left a lasting legacy to the Church and the world. It was he who began World Youth Days by inviting the youth of the world to Rome on Palm Sunday in 1984 for an International Jubilee of Youth. Some 300,000 attended and in a sense, this was the first World Youth Day. Over the following years many millions of young people would attend World Youth Days all over the world, including Sydney in 2008.

He presided over the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, with numerous large gatherings of people in Rome. He took advantage of that occasion to be the first Pope to ask forgiveness publicly for the Church's past sins, including mistreatment of Jews and other non-believers. "For the role that each one of us has had, with his behaviour, in these evils, contributing to a disfigurement of the face of the Church, we humbly ask forgiveness", he said before the altar of St Peter's.



He led the Church into the third millennium with the document *Novo millennio ineunte*, urging the faithful to build upon the fruits of the Jubilee Year and to "launch out into the deep", taking the Gospel to the world.

In an effort to encourage all to seek holiness by presenting different models of sanctity to them, he beatified and canonised more blessed and saints than all his predecessors put together. It was he who gave the Church the Luminous Mysteries of the Rosary, which consider the significant events of the public life of Christ before his Passion and Death. He reintroduced the Eucharistic Procession through the streets of Rome on the feast of Corpus Christi, after a lapse of many years, and he gave the Church the new feast of the Divine Mercy, which had arisen from revelations to St Faustina Kowalska in his native Poland. Every year of his papacy, including the last, just a few days before his death, he wrote a letter to priests for Holy Thursday, encouraging them in their important ministry.

Pope John Paul II was a great champion of the dignity of the human person and of human life from conception to natural death. In his encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (1995) he promoted a "culture of life" in the face of the many attacks on human life, including abortion and euthanasia. He was an ardent promoter of social justice, with a particular love for the poor. And he worked zealously for the cause of peace, doing everything he could to avoid the war in Iraq. His plea "War, no more!" will never be forgotten. He was without question the moral leader of the world, and heads of government of all political and religious persuasions sought audiences with him.

He preached the faith tirelessly, working to incorporate all the teachings of the Second Vatican Council into the life of the Church. Among his most important contributions to the field of Catholic teaching were his *Theology of the Body* addresses, on the meaning of sexuality, marriage and celibacy. And it was he who gave the Church the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and its shorter question-and-answer *Compendium*. In 1983 he promulgated the new *Code of Canon Law*, whose preparation had been announced by Pope John XXIII and which incorporated into Church law the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

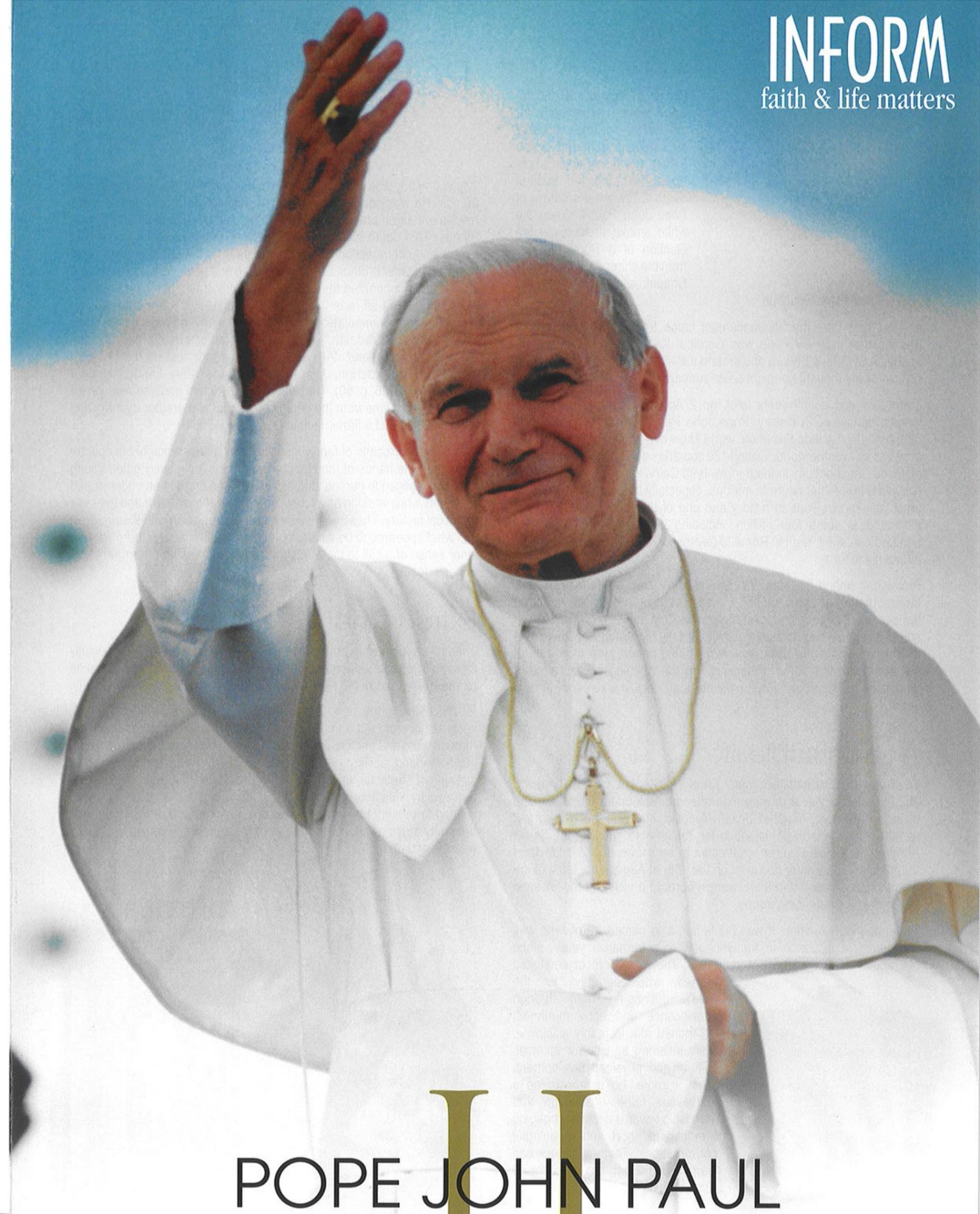
And he did much to foster the ecumenical movement of dialogue and understanding with communities of other faiths, bringing about much closer relations with many of these communities.

For this and for much more, there is good reason for him to be called, as he has been by many people, "John Paul the Great".

Questions for discussion

1. What particular aspects of the life and work of Pope John Paul II impress you the most?
2. Why do you think Pope John Paul II was so loved by young people, even in his declining years?
3. What do you consider to be Pope John Paul's greatest contribution to the Church?
4. Why do you think the Pope was so admired and respected by world leaders?

Fr Max Polak is Parish Priest of St Mary Star of the Sea Parish, West Melbourne.



POPE JOHN PAUL II

His life and Legacy

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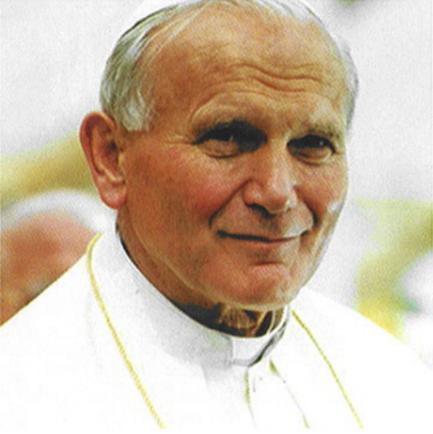
On the occasion of the Beatification of Pope John Paul II Fr Max Polak reflects on the life and legacy of this remarkable Pope.



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"Santo subito"

On October 16, 1978, the world waited expectantly for the results of the conclave of Cardinals gathered in the Sistine Chapel to elect a new Pope, following the sudden death a few weeks before of Pope John Paul I. When the white smoke announcing the election of a Pope billowed from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel, everyone wondered

who the next Pope would be.

A short time later the announcement came from the balcony of the Basilica that the new Pope was Cardinal Karol Wojtyla. Most of the people in St Peter's Square and around the world would have wondered, "Who?" Many thought he might be an African.

Twenty-six and a half years later, on 2 April 2005, after the second longest pontificate in history, Pope John Paul II died just short of his 85th birthday. By then the whole world knew him and loved him. He had travelled all over the world, visiting 129 countries and taking the message of Jesus Christ directly to the people, both Catholics and non-Catholics. He was a true father figure to millions, especially the young. He was the most well-known Pope in history and one of the most loved. A crowd estimated at some four million, including dignitaries from over one hundred countries, went to Rome to pay their last respects and hopefully attend his funeral.

Prominent among the many placards in the crowd at his funeral were several that read "Santo subito" – "A saint straight away." They captured the sentiment of people all over the world – that this Pope was indeed a saint and should be canonised quickly. Shortly thereafter Pope Benedict did, in fact, waive the usual five year waiting period after the death of someone with the "fame of sanctity" for the opening of his cause of beatification. Pope John Paul II will be beatified just six years after his death.

A remarkable life

Who was this extraordinary man? Karol Wojtyla was born on May 18, 1920. His father was a military man of some rank under the leadership of the Polish hero, Marshall Jozef Pilsudski, and was involved, a few months after the birth of his son in the remarkable rebuff of the Soviet Army at the Vistula River in what came to be known as the "miracle of the Vistula." The victory occurred on the 15th of August, the feast of the Assumption of Mary, and there were reports of a vision of the Blessed Virgin over the defending troops.

Understandably enough, it was his father, also named Karol, who was the dominant influence in the young Karol's formative years, since his mother died when he was only nine. The retired officer dedicated himself wholeheartedly to the child's upbringing right through adolescence and early manhood. He trained him in manly discipline, while fostering as well his spiritual, cultural and physical development. What is more, he demonstrated a marvellous fatherly affection and friendship towards his son, engaging with him in sport and meaningful conversations. Today's fathers can learn much from the conduct of Karol Wojtyla Sr.



Karol Wojtyla's parents on their wedding day

POPE JOHN PAUL II

His life and Legacy

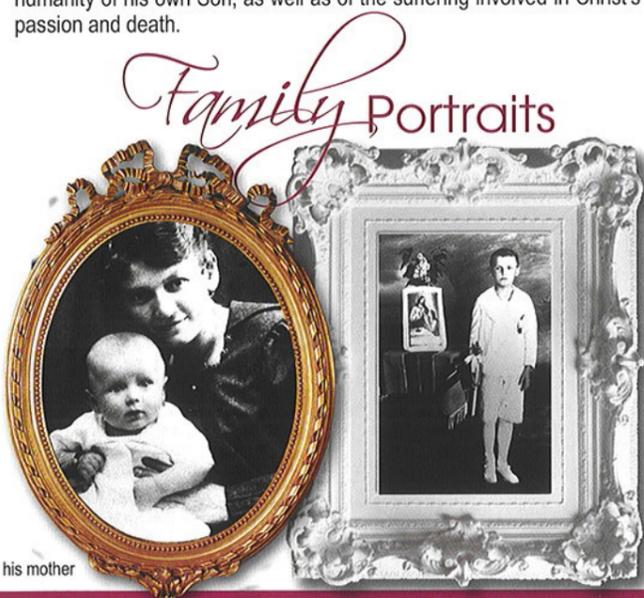
The young boy was always well liked and admired by his classmates and friends. He was good at sports, smart, talented and good looking. His refinement and moral depth were also noticed by both male and female friends. This depth of character would be further forged by sorrowful events and contradictions. Only four years after the death of his mother his beloved older brother, Edmond, a young and dedicated doctor, died of scarlet fever contracted through his heroic treatment of a dying woman. Then, hardest of all, was the loss of his father five years later, leaving him without any immediate family. "I was not at my mother's death, I was not at my brother's death, I was not at my father's death," he reflected some forty years later. "At twenty, I had already lost all the people I loved" (Edward Stourton, *John Paul II: Man of History*, London: Hodder & Stoughton 2006, p. 60). These blows caused him great sorrow, yet he was lifted each time from the depth of that grief to a greater maturity and wisdom of life and a firmer faith in God.

Added to the crucible of family loss was the circumstance of his country falling into the hands of the Nazi regime. The intellectually gifted young man was obliged to pursue studies in what amounted to an underground university while working as a labourer, first in a stone quarry and then in a chemical factory. These years saw his early infatuation with theatre grow into what appeared to be a career path. Yet simultaneously there was the inner sense of a call to the priesthood that began in the aftermath of his father's death.

Extraordinary providence

The action of divine providence in Karol Wojtyla's life is especially striking. There are apparent clues that he was being prepared for some extraordinary role within God's loving plans for his Church and humanity.

Firstly, there is the rich combination of personal gifts afforded him, such as his profound and analytical intellect, his ability to communicate through word and gesture and even his fine singing voice, his exceptional sociability and facility to engage with people, his excellent memory, his strength of character, and the manly and attractive figure he struck, later reduced by violence and sickness. One is tempted to think that God wanted to present him to the world as a reminder of the richness of the humanity of his own Son, as well as of the suffering involved in Christ's passion and death.



Karol with his mother

Karol's first Holy Communion

"I was not at my mother's death, I was not at my brother's death, I was not at my father's death. At twenty, I had already lost all the people I loved."

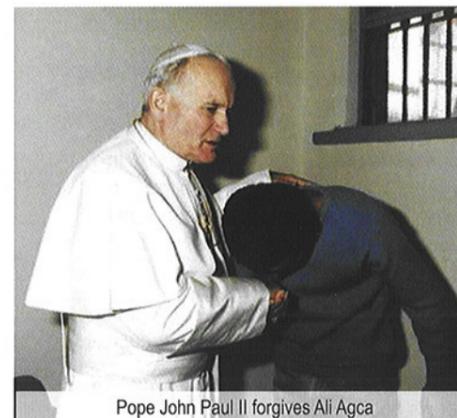
Pope John Paul II was a great champion of the dignity of the human person and of human life from conception to natural death. He was without question the moral leader of the world, and heads of government of all political and religious persuasions sought audiences with him.



Pope John Paul II with Wojciech Jaruzelski

Secondly, there is the historical fact that this man experienced at close range the two greatest modern abominations stemming from the rejection of God – dialectic materialism or communism and Nazi fascism. From 1939 to 1945 Poland was occupied by German troops under Nazi leadership. Hitler regarded the Poles as a "race of slaves" and treated them accordingly. It is well known that concentration camps were soon filled not only with Jews but other Polish citizens as well, many of whom died. These included priests like St Maximilian Kolbe and intellectuals like Kazimierz Bartel, as well as millions of persons of all ranks in Polish society. During those years John Paul II saw fellow students, professors, seminarians, Jewish and Catholic friends, and clergy vanish, never to be seen again. He risked his own life by being part of an underground network of Poles who attempted to save Jews from being delivered to the concentration camps.

This tragic period was followed by another, more drawn out era, less brutal but more insidious in some ways in its attack on the integrity of persons, on basic freedoms, and on the Church. This was the forty-four years of communist rule, with Poland reduced to a satellite of Soviet Russia along with other Eastern European countries. Because Poland was a large nation with a relatively homogeneous population as far as religion was concerned, it was somehow able – not without the workings of grace and charismatic figures like Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, and later Wojtyla himself – to maintain its culture, its moral conscience, and its historical memory better than most others.



Pope John Paul II forgives Ali Agca

The character and moral and intellectual awareness of the future Pope were further fashioned and refined by living through and engaging on an increasing scale with these influential and powerful political and philosophical movements. That such a man, with these kinds of attributes and this sort of experience, should become leader of the world's often beleaguered Catholics was indeed a master touch of the divine hand.

Brushes with death

Providence protected Karol Wojtyla before and after his election as Pope. At least twice during his earlier life he came close to death through mishap. The first of these incidents took place in childhood. A young friend whose father ran a pub in Wadowice, the town of Karol's youth, was playing with the gun of the local policeman who used to entrust it, supposedly unloaded, to the publican while he enjoyed a few drinks. Karol's friend, in jest, pointed the gun at him and pulled the trigger. There was shock on the faces of all when the gun fired and lightly grazed the side of Karol's head, lodging in the wall behind him. Later, as a young man during the German occupation a Nazi convoy passed him by at considerable speed. One of the trucks hit him, knocking him unconscious alongside the road. He lay there until a woman saw him and shouted down one of the other trucks, whose driver was sympathetic enough to load him on and take him to hospital.

The most dramatic of all these close calls with death was without doubt that which took place in St Peter's Square on May 13, 1981, less than three years into the papacy. The images of the Turkish would-be assassin Ali Agca firing a pistol at the Pope are engraved on many witnesses memories and in some remarkable photos taken by bystanders. Several bullets struck the Pope, one of them passing within a millimetre of his aorta. It could have proved fatal. The amount of blood that the Pontiff lost and the severity of his injuries made his recovery little short of a miracle. John Paul II would later say, with assurance, that Our Lady had "guided the

bullet", which had been fired at close range by an experienced assassin, significantly on the feast of Our Lady of Fatima. A year later, the Pope went to Fatima to give thanks to Our Lady for saving his life. He presented the bullet that lodged in his body for the crown of Our Lady of Fatima.

This event makes one think, along with all the others, that the man from Poland was a centrepiece in the divine plan that unseated a massive diabolical attack on the Church. A major part of this attack is represented by the inroads that Marxism – an aggressive, atheistic materialism – had made throughout much of both the Western and the Eastern world. In 1978, when the conclave that elected Wojtyla took place, numerous countries of the world were officially controlled by Marxist governments. Many others were strongly under the influence of Marxist politicians and intellectuals.

The courageous and at the same time tactful and intelligent way in which John Paul II confronted the issue of Marxism and its inroads into the Church through distorted forms of liberation theology can be seen as part of his road to sainthood. Although history will make the final judgment, there is no question of the significant role that he played in the downfall of communist regimes, first in his native Poland and then throughout much of Eastern Europe and Russia itself in 1989 and 1990.

Why he is a saint

This rough biographical sketch highlights a man of extraordinary mental and moral calibre, a strong and expressive faith and a deep concern for people. However, the essence of canonisable sanctity lies, above all, in love for God – in a faithful union with the divine will, even to the point of heroism. That is why Mary MacKillop is now St Mary of the Cross, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta is Blessed Mother Teresa.

In the case of Pope John Paul II, this love of God manifested itself especially in a deep devotion to Jesus Christ, as the Redeemer of man. His faith in the God incarnate who is Jesus of Nazareth and his utter conviction of Christ being the centre of God's universal plan of salvation leaped out of the pages of his first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis* (1979). First encyclicals of Popes are often regarded as the agenda for their papacy. Surely, this observation was verified in John Paul's pontificate.

In this letter to the universal Church, the Pope begins by reflecting: "The Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is the centre of the universe and of history. To him go my thoughts and my heart in this solemn moment of the world that the Church and the whole family of present-day humanity are now living."

Later he quotes a passage from the very document of the Second Vatican Council he helped to draft, a passage he was often to refer to, perhaps because it was his own thought from long before the Council: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come (*Rom* 5:14), Christ the Lord. Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling" (*Gaudium et spes*, 8).

