



SPECIAL REPORT

AN IN-DEPTH STUDY, ANALYSIS OR REVIEW EXPLORING THE MEDIA

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April 14, 2005

The Life of Pope John Paul: Shepherd of Souls or Antiquated Authoritarian?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As in last year's coverage of the death of President Ronald Reagan, the national media offered Pope John Paul II a generous farewell, highlighting his positive role in ending the Cold War, building bridges to other faiths, and inspiring Catholics in his energetic travels. But the positive coverage did not match the usual pattern of papal coverage over the decades of his pontificate (1978-2005).

In the typically secular and political approach of the networks, John Paul was portrayed during his life as positive or negative depending on whose political side he landed on. On internal church matters over the years, reporters glorified and enlarged the influence of those who wanted to invent a more convenient church that defines holiness down for its members, not preserve an ancient church and call its members to greater commitment.

Trends in papal coverage included:

- **The "Communist Pope"?** During his life and after his death, reporters and pundits alike acknowledged Pope John Paul's political triumph in opposing Soviet communism. But over the years, several liberal media accounts portrayed Pope John Paul as comparable to (or even inferior to) a communist dictator during his reign at the Vatican.
- **John Paul vs. Conservatism:** While the media protested the conservative influence of the Pope John Paul and the bishops on sexual issues, sometimes as a grievous invasion of the Church upon the State, when the Pope sounded a note more pleasing to liberals, suddenly his influence was lauded as a voice of booming moral authority against conservatives.

- **Liberals vs. John Paul:** Reporters who see themselves as advocates for democracy and modernity found Pope John Paul lacking in both during his tenure, insisting that he needed to stop his fuddy-duddy conservative opposition to the sexual revolution, look at the public opinion polls and get with the times, especially to keep parishioners inside the Catholic churches of America.
- **“Catholics” vs. Catholicism:** When discussing the urge for potential “reform” of the church during the last quarter-century, the secular media demanded religion-by-ballot, with no room for sacred traditions, and no awe for an “authoritarian” God. Reporters glorified and enlarged the influence of John Paul’s opponents, constantly lobbying for what they called the “many Catholics” who wanted to attack the traditions and teachings of the faith.

The report concludes that in all the attention the media will pay to the selection of a new pope, it should keep in mind that their coverage of the church should be designed to present a fair and accurate picture of the proceedings without putting their thumb on the scale in an attempt to invent a Catholic church more in tune with secular journalists.

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BY TIM GRAHAM
DIRECTOR OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

As in last year's coverage of the death of President Ronald Reagan, the national media offered Pope John Paul II a generous farewell, highlighting his positive role in ending the Cold War, building bridges to other faiths, and inspiring Catholics in his energetic travels. But the positive coverage did not match the usual pattern of papal coverage over the decades of his pontificate.

In the typically secular and political approach of the networks, John Paul was portrayed during his life as positive or negative depending on whose political side he landed on. On internal church matters over the years, reporters glorified and enlarged the influence of those who wanted to invent a more convenient church that defines holiness down for its members, not preserve an ancient church and call its members to greater commitment.

Coverage of churches is almost inherently difficult terrain for the titans of journalism, so committed to the worldly business of identifying the new, the trendy, the fresh and the fashionable. Age-enduring creeds aren't newsworthy unless they can be reinvented with a modernist twist, like *DaVinci Code* tales of Jesus Christ having a wife and kids. Ancient traditions are especially galling if they stand in the way of lifestyles of modern convenience, of quickly consumable luxury goods or quickly consumable sexual relationships.

American Catholics don't expect reporters to genuflect and give their church and their Pope glowingly positive coverage. Like other consumers of America's news media, religious people of all creeds should expect the media to offer solid explanatory journalism that covers both sides of newsworthy debates within the Catholic Church and other churches, but that's not always what they receive. Too often, the slanted soundbite collections and loaded prose of reporters betrays that they want to make every institution in society agreeable to their liberal worldview, that there's not one conservative policy or

tradition in the world that isn't in dire need of the media's advice and intervention and overturning.

In stories on the pontificate of John Paul II, reporters often chose sides in what one called the battle between "tolerance and absolutism." In their passion for that fight, "tolerance" gained the majority of the time, and "absolutism" received the majority of the grief.

The "Communist Pope"?

During his life and after his death, reporters and pundits alike acknowledged Pope John Paul's political triumph in opposing Soviet communism. But over the years, several liberal media accounts portrayed Pope John Paul as comparable to (or even inferior to) a communist dictator during his reign at the Vatican. They failed to note any differences between church powers and state powers.

■ A 1989 meeting between Soviet dictator Mikhail Gorbachev and the Pope gave CBS and ABC an opportunity to take moral equivalence to absurd new heights. During the November 29, 1989 *CBS Evening News*, Dan Rather declared, "This week's meeting of Pope John Paul and Gorbachev brings together two traditional enemies, both of whom have shown, time and again, that they can rise above the hatreds of history." Rather went on to lay the most ridiculous metaphor before a national audience: "The meeting, said one priest in Rome, is like the lion lying down with the lamb. But in this case, he said, it's hard to tell who's the lion and who's the lamb." (It was almost as odd as *Time* essayist Lance Morrow's intoxicated January 1, 1990 take on Mikhail Gorbachev as the "Communist Pope and the Soviet Martin Luther.")

■ During the next day's *Good Morning America*, ABC correspondent Steve Fox noted the similarity of the two men: "The Pope is a tough disciplinarian. He will brook no dissent on doctrinal matters....And if you think about Mr. Gorbachev, he, early in his career, was the head of the KGB [*sic*]." CBS correspondent Barry Petersen continued this line of thought: "I think [Gorbachev's] trying to say to the Pope, listen, communism and Catholicism, we really have a lot in common. Kind of an astonishing thought if you think about it." A lot of freedom-loving Catholics begged to differ.

■ The comparisons to communism erupted again in 1991, when in early June, the Pope visited Poland for the fourth time. Instead of

The Pope Shared Castro's Values?

"The Cuban President is, by his own account, no dogmatic anti-religionist....Likewise, the Pope is by no means a capitalist tool...."

— Religious News Service reporter Ira Rifkin writing a January 10, 1998 *Washington Post* article headlined "Castro and the Pope: Opponents with Shared Values, While Differing on Religion, Both Embrace Altruism and Reject Unbridled Capitalism."

delivering an even-handed account of the new tensions in post-communist Poland, CBS reporter Bert Quint ended his June 1 *Evening News* report by suggesting the new society in some respects was inferior to the old: "But most of his fellow countrymen do not share John Paul's concept of morality....Many here expect John Paul to use his authority to support Church efforts to ban abortion, perhaps the country's principal means of birth control. And this, they say, could deprive them of a freedom of choice the communists never tried to take away from them."

Pope vs. Pope

"Pope Challenges Castro to Embrace Democracy"

— **Headline in the *Washington Times*, January 24, 1998.**

"Pope Exhorts Cubans Not to Leave Island"

— **Headline in the *Los Angeles Times* the same day.**

"Pope Criticizes U.S. Embargo: Blockades Hurt 'Most Needy,' Pontiff Says"

— ***Washington Post* headline, same day.**

■ On the June 3 *CBS This Morning*, Quint began: "The Pope today attacked one principle communism brought to Poland that most of his fellow countrymen want to keep: separation of church and state." But the "principle" the Soviets brought was not Jefferson's separation of church and state, but suppression of the church by the state. Behind the Iron Curtain, Catholic priests and believers were killed and tortured, imprisoned and stifled by the communists, not granted freedom of worship.

While Quint's stories on the papal visit featured soundbites from average Poles who supported his left-wing viewpoint, his three stories included no one who was inspired by the Pope's visit or who opposed abortion. When asked by the MRC why viewers heard only one side of the story, Quint declared: "We are not an opinion-sampling organization. When we went out and interviewed people at random, [most] made comments like the one we put on the air." A "random" sampling of the hundreds of thousands who attended the Pope's rallies could have shown just the opposite. So who was more "intolerant of dissent"?

KELLER'S CATHOLIC KREMLIN

Even in 2002, long after Soviet communism crumbled, liberal journalists were still making unfavorable comparisons of the Pope to communist dictatorships. In a May 4, 2002 column in *The New York Times*, staff columnist Bill Keller — currently overseeing all the news pages as the paper's Executive Editor — compared the Vatican to the Kremlin. "One paradox of the Polish Pope is that while he is rightly revered for helping bring down the godless communists, he has replicated something very like the old Communist Party in his church...Karol Wojtyla has shaped a hierarchy that is intolerant of dissent, unaccountable to its members, secretive in the extreme and willfully clueless about how people live." He added: "Like the Communist Party circa Leonid Brezhnev, the Vatican exists first and foremost to preserve its power."

Keller did not explain how Catholics were like Soviet subjects. They do not suffer from forced obedience to their parish priest. They need not fear a trip to the gulag or a quick execution for disagreeing with their Holy Father. They have every liberty to disagree, and every right to walk out of the church, never to return. But for all his bad analogies, Keller was really complaining that the secular liberal media intelligentsia should have the right to “reform” the Catholic Church, to remake an authoritarian God in their own more “compassionate” and “tolerant” image.

John Paul, Meet St. Bill

“If there was any doubt that by virtue of his position, Clinton occupied as lofty a plane as the Pope on Tuesday — or that the Pope, by virtue of being human, had some of the same needs as Clinton — it was erased by the sign marking a restroom near their meeting room: ‘President or Holy Father Only,’ it read.”

— **Last sentence of a January 27, 1999 *New York Times* story by reporter James Bennet on Clinton’s St. Louis visit with the Pope.**

Keller’s 2002 column looked forward to John Paul’s death as an occasion for the Church’s hostile takeover by “reformers” who would exchange ancient creeds for comfortable slogans. Keller argued “one reason many Catholics see the moment as ripe for reform is that this Pope is on his last legs. Soon, the hope goes, a vigorous new leader may emerge. Maybe so. But like the Communists, John Paul has carefully constructed a Kremlin that will be inhospitable to a reformer.” To Keller, the Pope also committed the offense of forming seminaries that are “begetting a generation of inflexible young priests who have no idea how to talk to real-life Catholics.” Is Keller in favor of secular liberal activists being “flexible” on first principles, like abortion, for example? Are the only Catholics living a “real life” the ones who agreed with Keller?

One reason for Keller’s bilious broadside against the Pope was revealed when he identified himself as “what a friend calls a ‘collapsed Catholic’ — well beyond lapsed.” Keller claimed no right to reform the church as a Catholic believer, but only as part of the “larger struggle within the human race, between the forces of tolerance and absolutism.”

It’s important to remember that John Paul’s anti-communism in no way meshed with the media consensus, which until late in the 1980s imagined Soviet communism was here to stay, so the wise man would learn to live with them, side by side. If this Polish pontiff had been a religious version of Willy Brandt, chanting for peaceful coexistence with the godless oppressors of Russia and Eastern Europe, the media would not have opposed him. The consensus would have hailed his wisdom and his peacemaker’s way.

John Paul vs. Conservatism

Since the Holy Father was not a conventional worldly politician, but a man devoted to leading a global flock to greater holiness, he could be claimed as an ally by conservatives

on some issues (abortion, homosexuality, embryo-destroying stem cell research) and claimed as an ally by liberals on others (wars, capital punishment, the cry of the poor). While the media protested the conservative influence of the Pope John Paul and his bishops on sexual issues during his reign, sometimes as a grievous invasion of the Church upon the State, when the Pope sounded a note more pleasing to liberals, suddenly his influence was lauded as a voice of booming moral authority against conservatives:

Capitalism, Good or Bad?

"Papal Encyclical Urges Capitalism to Shed Injustices"

— *New York Times* headline, May 3, 1991.

"Free Market Gets Pope's Blessing"

— *Washington Times*, same day.

■ The Pope's 1995 visit to America put him right in the middle of the Clinton vs. Gingrich political dynamic. Robert McFadden covered the Pope's arrival for the October 5, 1995 *New York Times*: "Without naming names, or even mentioning the Republican-dominated Congress, the Pope also seemed to admonish the supporters of proposed laws to restrict immigration and dismantle many of the nation's programs for the poor. In doing so, he appeared to echo many of President Clinton's warnings."

■ The next day, after the Pope called legal abortion a "moral blight" on America, *Times* reporter Celestine Bohlen pronounced: "Though he mentioned the rights of the 'unborn child' at Giants Stadium last night, his most striking statements...have been warnings against what he perceives as a rising movement to limit immigration, reduce subsidies for the poor and weak, and retreat to an isolationist position."

■ The same spin made its way onto television. On *Good Morning America* October 6, ABC reporter Bill Blakemore proclaimed: "He's striking a theme that runs directly counter to Republican plans to limit welfare programs for the poor." PBS anchor Robert MacNeil wondered: "Is the Pope against the Contract with America?"

■ NBC's appointed papal expert in three morning interviews, liberal Catholic priest and novelist Andrew Greeley, told *Today* co-host Giselle Fernandez on October 7: "I heard a Catholic conservative last night say that the Pope's words have nothing to do with American politics, and I can't imagine anybody being more totally wrong. The Pope has come to the United States when it's in a very mean-spirited period, when it's bashing immigrants, bashing poor people, bashing minorities. And the Pope has come to say 'Hey, stop that!' He isn't talking about specific legislative measures, but he's certainly addressing himself to the spirit that elected and sustains the Gingrich-Dole Congress."

But when asked about Catholic reaction to the Pope's moral authority on sexual matters, Greeley flip-flopped and found the Pope had nothing to do with America on these issues: "Well, most Catholics choose to be Catholic on their own terms....Where they

think the Pope really doesn't understand, they reserve the right to follow their own consciences and appeal to a God who does understand."

■ On October 10, CNN anchor Judy Woodruff challenged Pat Buchanan on *Inside Politics* to defend himself against the idea that his politics was betraying his faith: "How do you, as a Catholic, reconcile that with what your own party has done this year and is talking of doing with regard to cutting back programs for the poor in this country?" Reporters couldn't distinguish between the believer's personal duty toward the poor and the believer's support for government programs for the poor, whether they actually helped the poor or harmed them.

■ Two years later, NBC touted papal intervention in a Virginia murder case. On the July 23, 1997 *NBC Nightly News*, Bob Faw found religion in telling the story of Joseph O'Dell, convicted of raping and murdering a Virginia Beach waitress in 1985. Tom Brokaw opened the story: "The clock is counting down for a convicted murderer who does have a powerful advocate, no less than Pope John Paul, asking that he be spared, but so far not even the Pope has been able to persuade Virginia's governor to reopen this case."

■ On January 28, 1999, *CBS Evening News* anchor Dan Rather opened with how the governor of Missouri agreed to the Pope's request to commute a death sentence: "Good evening. Joseph Stalin once mocked the power of the Pope, asking, 'How many divisions does he have'? He doesn't have any, but again today there was on display the power of John Paul II to prevail over politicians."

Reporters have failed to challenge liberal Catholic politicians, from Mario Cuomo to Ted Kennedy to John Kerry, on how they reconcile their stands for abortion or government approval of gay "civil unions" or "marriages" with their professed faith. Just as cafeteria Catholics embrace the parts of the faith they like and reject the rest, the media highlighted the parts of the Pope's message they perceived to merge with their political aims — and then returned to words like "rigid" and "old-fashioned" to describe the Pope's message on abortion and sexuality.

Liberals vs. John Paul

Reporters who see themselves as advocates for democracy and modernity found Pope John Paul lacking in both during his tenure, insisting that he needed to stop his fuddy-duddy conservative opposition to the sexual revolution, look at the public opinion polls and get with the times, especially to keep parishioners inside the Catholic churches of America.

An April 5 AP story remembering Pope John Paul's popularity with young people quoted Robert Drinan, the former congressman priest, declaring his death was "like a grandfather dying and one girl reminded me that her grandfather never approved of her jeans." Reporters have perpetually portrayed the American Catholic Church as the randy grandchild rolling their eyes at the out-of-touch Polish grandpa. In an October 2, 1995 Style section story in the *Washington Post*, writer Henry Allen revealed the media attitude bluntly: "There are 60 million Catholics in America, and for many of them he also speaks with the voice of a conservative crank when he stonewalls on abortion, birth control, married priests, women priests and so on." Reporters also resented the Pope's resistance to international bureaucracies trying to spread the culture of social liberalism.

■ On the November 6, 1989 edition of ABC's *Good Morning America*, reporter Kathleen DeLaski told viewers: "The bishops are expected to adopt a more conservative policy on AIDS prevention this week, one more in line with the Vatican, but less popular with many American Catholics. Some showed their displeasure outside yesterday's Mass that opened the conference." DeLaski then showed these alleged "Catholics" screaming "Racist, sexist, anti-gay! Catholic bigots, go away!" DeLaski added: "Many gay Catholics feel the proposal is irresponsible."

■ *Newsweek's* Eleanor Clift, on the May 11, 1994 *McLaughlin Group*, displayed the media's desire for utter rejection of the conservative Vatican influence on the global culture in the buildup to the UN Population Conference in Cairo: "I'm rooting for a return to the Italian Popes, because in Italy they absolutely flaunt the Vatican and they may act as an effort to bring the Church into alignment with modern life. The Church is virtually alone in its position on abortion as we approach this population conference."

John Paul II, As Awesome As Hillary

Carl Bernstein: "Look, she [Hillary Clinton] is a remarkable woman."

Geraldo Rivera: "And she is one of the great stories of our time, the same way the Pope was."

— **CNBC's Rivera Live, January 22, 1999.**

■ Pope John Paul drew disdain from the networks for "distracting" the Cairo conference with his anti-abortion stance. Citing a "nasty fight" between President Clinton and the Pope, CBS reporter Martha Teichner remarked on September 3, 1994: "The security in effect for the UN Population Conference in Cairo is the kind used to prevent aircraft hijackings. But so far, the only hijacking taking place is of the agenda."

■ ABC repeatedly demonstrated a hostility to religious objections to the UN consensus. On October 7, 1994, Peter Jennings announced: "In Cairo, the Pope's representatives are causing tempers to flare at the World Population Conference as the Vatican holds to its uncompromising position on abortion. ABC's Jim Bittermann reports from there that what on the surface appears to be a debate over a few words has badly distracted from the conference's overall mission."

■ Bittermann reported the spin from the Planned Parenthood side: “Vatican representatives at the population conference were today being cast in the role of spoiler, their stubborn style angering fellow delegates....And delegates weren’t the only ones frustrated. Thousands of activists, who came here to push causes from the environment to women’s rights, have been ignored as the representatives from 182 nations spend their time and energy debating the abortion issue.”

■ On October 8, 1995, at the same time reporters were celebrating the papal visit’s potential to hurt the Gingrich Republicans in Congress, *Today* co-host Giselle Fernandez asked American papal envoy Mary Ann Glendon: “The Pope’s stands on issues such as, for instance, abortion, popularity control, birth control — is he aware that American Catholic women, the majority, have different views than he does on these matters?” NBC thought the Pope should be more worried about his “popularity control” — yes, Fernandez actually said that — than about conserving a traditional sexual ethic.

■ NBC’s David Gregory displayed the media’s rhetorical tricks on the July 23, 2001 *NBC Nightly News*. The Pope’s stand against embryo-destroying stem cell research was not a problem for liberals, but for the conservative president. “In front of reporters, the Pontiff called the creation of embryos for research a symbol of a, quote, ‘tragic coarsening of consciences’ Determining the right thing to do on stem cell research has not been so easy for Mr. Bush, and today the Pope only made it harder.”

The media’s rigidity on the separation of church and state grew much firmer when the Pope disagreed with the Clinton administration or the United Nations or other liberal activists. Suddenly the “wall of separation” was breached, and papal opinions were no longer welcomed.

Castigating John Paul’s Conservatism

Bryant Gumbel: “He is the first non-Italian Pope in almost 500 years, he’s the longest serving Pope of the 20th century. Is there any evidence that Catholics are in any way better off for his stewardship?”

Greg Burke: “I think in a way, yes. He has brought clarity. The Church after Vatican II was very confused in many ways. There were a lot of things out there and I think in a way, he hasn’t made everyone happy, but at least he’s said this is what we believe, this is where we’re going.”

Gumbel: “But he’s been a very, in that sense he’s been a very divisive Pope, hasn’t he?”

Burke: “He has.”

Gumbel: “I mean, coming down on the side of conservatism in almost all cases.”

Burke: “No, no that’s true. And yet at the same time he’s convinced that unity is key, clarity is key. OK? That is true. But he’s convinced the — this is what we have to maintain. The Church is based on tradition. The Church, by its nature, is a conservative — meaning we’re preserving tradition for 2000 years — organization.”

— Exchange on *The Early Show* with the author of *An Invitation to Joy*, a collection of the Pope’s letters and homilies, December 16, 1999.

“Catholics” vs. Catholicism

When discussing “reform” of the Catholic Church in the last quarter-century, the secular, politically minded liberal media establishment often demanded religion by ballot, with no room for sacred traditions, and no awe for an “authoritarian” God. TV coverage suggested the public should only hear the views of the Church’s attackers; reporters had little use for traditionalists. It’s one thing to describe a church conflict with a fair and balanced approach. But the media glorified and enlarged the influence of dissenters, constantly identifying and quoting what they called the “many Catholics” who agreed with their worldview.

■ On May 4, 1990, *NBC Nightly News* anchor Tom Brokaw covered the Pope’s trip to Mexico, “a country where there’s a huge population problem. Many people say that problem is magnified by the Church’s opposition to birth control.” Reporter George Lewis found anonymous “experts” to disparage the Church: “Family planning experts say that ignorance and superstition play a big role in Mexico’s population crisis...they also say the Catholic Church has to share the blame.”

■ When Pope John Paul came to Denver in 1993 for World Youth Day, the most biased TV story from the trip came on the CBS show *Sunday Morning* on August 8. Reporter Jerry Bowen presented 13 soundbites of papal critics and dissenters, compared to just two from Denver Archbishop Francis Stafford.

Critics included a nun, Sister Mary Luke, who said the church must have female priests and rid the Church of “this kind of patriarchy”; a divorced mom, Leanna Day (“It’s real strict and real rigid, and we can’t, we don’t live a real strict and rigid life”); Day’s liberal priest, Father John Burton (“The Church either changes with the world, or it’s left as a museum piece”) and Jim Beeten, a former seminarian who quit because he refused to remain celibate. Bowen defended his story to the MRC’s *MediaWatch* at the time as full of “very devout Catholics.” This was typical of TV coverage of the trip: an MRC count of 14 network stories on the papal visit found 57 soundbites criticized church teaching, while only 27 defended it.

■ A week later on the same program, Jerry Bowen concluded: “There are some who say he would have been more comfortable in the 5th century, but some theologians say that really, some of the 5th century Popes were more progressive than John Paul II.” When a researcher for *MediaWatch* asked whether Bowen had studied the 5th century Popes or what theologians said to him, he insisted it was a joke: “These are comments that are made in less of a scholarly vein...I think it’s a light-hearted observation.” He added: “I didn’t think of it as being anti-John Paul or anti-Pope.”

■ On January 22, 1995, the CBS show *60 Minutes* devoted an entire segment to promoting the left-wing group Call To Action, beginning with the “many Catholics” line: “Among the things they challenge is the Pope’s position on birth control, on women becoming priests, and on priests being able to marry....There’s no denying that for many American Catholics, those teachings have lost their appeal.”

■ Father Mike Flager denounced the Church as “spiritually bankrupt” and said the traditional Church has “a love it or leave it, you know, it’s that crazy patriotism philosophy.” Edwina Gately “was described as a devout Catholic with the tongue of a pagan tart.” Gately replied with a smile: “Well, I’m OK with the ‘pagan tart,’ it’s the ‘devout Catholic’ that worries me.” Wallace reminded her she once said “the Vatican is the only tyranny left in the world today.” But Wallace insisted his subjects were “hardly wild-eyed radicals, these people from Call to Action. They’re sober church workers, nuns and priests, and just plain concerned Catholics... their ideals formed in the heady age of change back in the ‘60s.”

■ Wallace’s report included 25 soundbites from the “dissidents” without broadcasting a single voice in favor of traditional Catholicism. Wallace later conceded to the Catholic newspaper *Our Sunday Visitor* that “interviews with Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon and George Weigel of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, prominent lay Catholics who support Church teaching, were not used because producers felt the material was too dissimilar to work with footage from the Call to Action conference.” They were also “too dissimilar” with CBS thinking.

■ Several magazine clips aptly illustrate the media’s liberal “reform” impulse from outside the world of religion. In a June 18, 1999 feature titled “A Closer Look,” *Time* magazine’s Web site revisited a favorite pejorative ‘R’ word as related to the Pope. The subheadline read, “As the millennium ends, the era of John Paul II draws to a close. And soon the Vatican must decide how much of the Polish Pope’s revolution – and his rigidity – it wants to keep.”

Reporter Frank Pellegrini complained: “The enormous charisma of the man has made zealots of the converted and converts of the heathen, but John Paul II has brooked no heretics.... it is impossible to call John Paul II anything other than a conservative. He does not take to new currents in Catholicism, and has displayed a ready pen for excommunication. He is stoutly against birth control, abortions and female priests, and has similarly held the line on remarriage after divorce, annulments and celibacy in the priesthood....When the Pope comes to the [United] States, nuns argue with him, liberal Catholics tug at their collars nervously, and liberated women grouse.”

Like many other reporters, Pellegrini could not understand why the Pope wouldn't run his church like a focus group: "It is a Catholicism that stands, on the ideological spectrum, far to the right of what many of even its devotees would like it to be, and thanks to John Paul's appointees it is not likely to budge. In answer to the forces of liberalism, John Paul II has stacked the deck."

■ In her Web-exclusive column on March 29, 2002, *Newsweek's* Eleanor Clift perfectly distilled how the media see the world through secular and political eyes. Clift began: "Congress has made some changes, and maybe the church can, too." In what may be a first for liberals, Clift suggested an end to a centralized bureaucracy: "The papacy as we know it, is a 19th-century convention. The idea that in an age of e-mail and fax, and the ability to whisk around the globe in jets, everybody kowtows to a central figure seems quaint." Clift also banged the drum for an end to priestly celibacy: "The priesthood attracts sexually conflicted men, and the church will have to face up to that as a potentially criminal matter, not as a way to perpetuate an outdated custom of celibacy."

■ On the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul's reign came in October of 2003, the liberal line — "many Catholics" vs the intransigent Pope — emerged again. On the October 12 *NBC Nightly News*, reporter Dawna Friesen emphasized: "For some, the celebrations will be bittersweet. The Pope's conservative views on abortion, contraception, divorce, woman priests and homosexuality have alienated many Catholics, as did the sex abuse scandals involving priests." But Friesen ended with a Wisconsin woman, Mary Sadarno, who said being in the Pope's presence reaffirmed her faith.

■ On the October 12, 2003 *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*, the host questioned liberal Catholic priest and magazine editor Father Thomas Reese from the left: "Many of the Pope's critics have a hard time reconciling his outspoken championing of human rights, of human dignity with what they see as his somewhat authoritarian, antiquated view of women and sexuality." He also asked: "The Pope has held the line on women clergy and this has made many of his critics say he simply doesn't get it when it comes to women."

ABC's Cokie Roberts then elaborated on the liberal theme: "You can feel very left out when you approach an institution that is completely male-dominated and hierarchical. It's bad enough in this country, where at least we have women on the altar doing readings and girls on the altar as servers. When you actually go the Vatican in Rome, at St. Peter's

Too Dogmatic in Denver

"Pope John Paul II may have slowed down a step or two, but this Pope, who's often combined a personal warmth with a theological rigidity that seemed at odds with the times, isn't done yet."

— *CBS Evening News* reporter Mark Phillips, August 11, 1993.

"But as he left Colorado to fly back to Rome, the Pope's unbending principles to Church dogma leave many U.S. Catholics with strained feelings to Church teachings despite their continuing strong faith in God."

— *NBC reporter Roger O'Neil on Today*, August 16, 1993.

there's not a woman in sight around the altar, there's not a lay person in sight, and there's a sense of alienation, there's no question about that. You really have to say to yourself, 'this is my church despite that.'" ABC asked only five people to offer opinions on John Paul's legacy: Reese, Roberts, former Vatican Ambassador and Congresswoman Lindy Boggs (Cokie's mother), Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez of Honduras, and, for non-Catholics, Mikhail Gorbachev.

■ CBS reporter Allen Pizzey summed up the occasion on the *Evening News* of October 16, 2003 with the usual emphasis on the many "flaws" (read: conservatism) of the Pope: "He helped end communism, reached out to Muslims by entering a mosque, sought reconciliation with the Jews by praying at the Wailing Wall....but his legacy is not without flaws. His staunch refusal to ordain women as priests and rigorous rejection of birth control, abortion and homosexuality, have alienated many."

Notice that in the media argot, cafeteria Catholics never "alienate" other members of the Church, and are not to be described as "divisive." Only conservatism alienates and divides.

Conclusion

In all the attention the media will pay to the selection of a new Pope, and entering into an era evaluating what John Paul's long and influential pontificate means in Church history, journalists should keep in mind that their coverage of the Church should be designed to present a fair and accurate picture of the proceedings without putting their thumb on the scale in an attempt to invent a Catholic Church more in tune with secular journalists.

The secular media can clearly play a powerful role in reforming human corruption in religious institutions, as all the coverage of the nightmare of clerical sex abuse in the Catholic church has shown. Papal historian George Weigel has cautioned those who find too much joyful aggression in the coverage of corrupt priests that despite the major media's secularism, their drive to expose and drive out corruption in the priesthood looks a lot like God's work.

Pope John Paul told the faithful that in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the church teaches that one of its major goals in the world is to evangelize people to the gospel message of Jesus, to spread the good news of a savior who cleanses the sins of all who believe in Him. Church leaders hope that major media coverage can in some way bring readers and viewers a better understanding or deeper commitment to Catholicism.

This often seems to be in conflict with what the secular media wants. It seems to find Catholic and evangelical Christian evangelization and conversion not in their interests, a force inimical to “progressive” social and political goals. Its advocacy in favor of the “many Catholics” who share their beliefs can resemble their usual political coverage, trying to convince the loosely committed voter, or the loosely committed religious believer, that all good sense and all polling majorities inevitably will land on the side of the liberal worldview, that “tolerance” is the wave of the future, and “absolutism” belongs in a previous century.

The media all too often scratch that inevitable itch to not just report the first draft of history, but to push, prod, and persuade to create a history of their own making, to their own liking. The audience cannot merely be informed. It must be led to accept the media’s daily dogma.

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