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Will John Paul's Historic 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Today Become Another Moment for Demanding Liberalism?

## The “Antiquated, Authoritarian” Pope Party

As the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul's ascension to the papacy approached, TV news stars acknowledged his remarkable reign — his role in the decline of communism, his globe-trotting evangelism, his attempts to reach out to other faiths, especially Judaism and Islam. Despite these positive notes, the networks still offered specific criticism for what they consider his greatest failing: his unfortunate nods to conservatism.

On Sunday's *NBC Nightly News*, reporter Dawna Friesen noted: “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.” (Friesen did turn next to a woman who felt reaffirmed to be at the celebrations.)

On ABC's *This Week*, host George Stephanopoulos asked a largely liberal cast — and former Soviet dictator Mikhail Gorbachev — to assess the Pope. He proposed to Father Thomas Reese, the editor of the liberal weekly *America*: “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.” The host did not ask why liberal Catholics see a conflict between advocating “human rights” and the rights of the unborn human.

Stephanopoulos then pressed Reese again from the left: “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.” Reese agreed the Pope was “alienating women.” Cokie Roberts, who was bumped from the program to make way for the male ex-Clinton aide, added her feelings: “You can feel very left out when you approach an institution that is completely male-dominated and hierarchical.” Historically, the liberal media have been quite harsh on the Pope's conservative stands on sexuality:

**Catholicism Worse than Communism.** “Many here [in Poland] 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.” — CBS News reporter Bert Quint on the June 1, 1991 *Evening News*.

**The Pope's Hopelessly Archaic.** “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.” — CBS's Jerry Bowen on *Sunday Morning*, August 15, 1993.

### Flashback: Dan Rather's Ferocious Pope

“This week's meeting of Pope John Paul and Mikhail Gorbachev brings together two traditional enemies, both of whom have shown, time and again, that they can rise above the hatreds of history...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.” — Dan Rather on the Nov. 29, 1989 *CBS Evening News*.

“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's Roger O'Neil on *Today*, August 16, 1993.

**Mister Divisive.** “He's been a very divisive Pope, hasn't he?...I mean coming down on the side of conservatism in almost all cases.” — CBS *Early Show* host Bryant Gumbel, December 16, 1999.

**Catholicism Is Communism:** “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....intolerant of dissent, unaccountable to its members, secretive in the extreme and willfully clueless about how people live.” — *New York Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller in a May 4, 2002 column.

It would be sad if this historic occasion became just another moment for secular TV reporters to demand more liberalism from religious leaders. — *Tim Graham*

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