

# THE ENDURING LEGACY OF JOHN PAUL II

Ronald J. Rychlak

George Weigel's magnificent biography of Pope John Paul II, *Witness to Hope*, was published in 1999. Knowing that the pope's story was not over, Weigel promised that he would one day write a completion. This is it, and it is a powerful and welcome compliment to the earlier biography, but it is much more than that. This book stands on its own and gives the reader an authentic sense of history, of Karol Woytyła (John Paul II) and his place in history, and of the Catholic Church and her teaching.

The first part of *The End and the Beginning*, "Nemesis," is a riveting account of John Paul II's battles with Soviet Communism. The second section, "Kenosis," offers an unforgettable portrait of John Paul II's efforts to spread Catholic teachings, from his early years until his physical demise. The third section, "Metanoia," examines John Paul's inner motivation and his place in history. Overall, the book provides history, biography, theology, and much drama.

The section on Soviet actions against the Church is particularly exciting and unexpected. Many of the years covered here were also covered in *Witness to Hope*, but Weigel has new sources of information, so he has new stories to tell, and he tells them very well.

Drawing on documents from the archives of the Soviet KGB, East Germany's Stasi, and Poland's SB, Weigel shows that the communist regimes were even more duplicitous, petty, and evil than most people had suspected, and the Church was a favorite target. Weigel writes: "Among the enemies of Soviet communism, real and imagined, none was more feared by the KGB and its predecessor than the Catholic Church." This fear of the Church spread to other intelligence agencies across the Soviet bloc. Poland and the pope's Polish identity is an important part of this story. Weigel explains: "The Catholic Church, which suffered terribly during World War II, had emerged with its honor intact and its historic role as the repository of Polish

national identity and memory confirmed." After World War II, Pope Pius XII took a hard line against communism, and the Soviets brutally repressed the Polish Church and Church leaders (especially Bishop—later Cardinal —Stefan Wyszyński). Weigel calls Poland under the Soviets "a country in which men of unblemished honor and extraordinary heroism could be convicted as traitors and murdered by communist thugs."

Shortly before the future pope was made a bishop in 1958, the Soviets ratcheted up their campaign against the Church. Soviet agents monitored Bishop Woytyla for years. They did not, however, originally see him as a serious threat. After all, he was just a poet and an artist. They did not know the heart or the future of this young Polish priest.

Within months of his election, John Paul II ignited a revolution of conscience in Poland, and it ultimately led to the collapse of European communism and the demise of the Soviet Union. Of course, much of this was covered in *Witness to Hope*. New to this book, however, are many of the actions and reactions of the communist authorities. Efforts to suppress the Church in communist countries were rampant.

Soviet bloc intelligence agencies placed spies, disguised as priests or students, into many churches. Even the Eastern Orthodox Metropolitan of Leningrad, one of the presidents of the World Council of Churches, was a KGB agent. Spies were not only in Polish churches during Woytyla's years as bishop, they were in the Vatican itself during his pontificate. These agents tried to influence political policies and theological doctrine (especially with liberation theology).

In chronicling this secret war between the Vatican and the Soviet Union, Weigel reveals the astonishing lengths to which the Soviet bloc was willing to go to undermine John Paul II. He offers little new information regarding Soviet involvement in the 1981 assassination attempt, but he does note that most Poles and many close friends of the pope felt that the Soviets were not completely innocent. He also makes clear that Western democracies did not look very hard; they were afraid of what they would find.

One fascinating story relates to an effort to smear the pope's reputation. Using their counterfeiting experts, in 1983 Polish intelligence agents crafted a phony diary purportedly written by a former lover of Cardinal Woytyla. They used the identity

of a woman he would have known but who had since passed away. The plan was to leave the diary hidden in an apartment where it would be found during a police raid. Western reporters would assume that it was legitimate and report on it as such. As it turned out, however, the agent assigned to plant the fake diary got drunk and was involved in an automobile accident. In an effort to avoid arrest and detention, he explained who he was and exposed the plan. One can only wonder what would have happened had the pope's credibility been damaged early in his pontificate by a disinformation scheme like this.

Soviet bloc intelligence agents also conducted phony letter-writing campaigns against the pope, and they sought out "malleable publishers in capitalist and developing countries" to damage the Church's reputation by producing books about the Inquisition, the Vatican's alleged relations with Nazism, and the Church's wealth. These hatchet jobs were often complimented with blackmail campaigns against Vatican personnel.

An interesting issue for students of Vatican diplomacy is the relationship between the late pope and his Secretary of State, Cardinal Agostino Casaroli. In 1979 John Paul made Casaroli a Cardinal and named him Secretary of State even though they took very different approaches to communism. Casaroli was the principal architect of the Vatican's policy of Ostpolitik—cautious reconciliation with communist governments. John Paul was more directly confrontational. Despite Soviet assurances to the contrary, he knew that it was impossible to have "communism with a human face."

Sometimes Casaroli was afraid that the pope's actions would lead to bloodshed. It didn't. Weigel credits the pope for both his effective use of Casaroli's skills and for playing a pivotal role in the collapse of European communism. There are those who would dispute this analysis (arguing that communism would eventually have collapsed under its own weight), but Weigel makes a persuasive case that John Paul ignited a "revolution of conscience" with his nine day trip to Poland in 1979. It is hard to deny that the trip was a trigger for the collapse. "And of course: no John Paul, no nine days."

In the second part of the book, Weigel brings us very close to the man Karol Wojtyla and allows us to see him and know him as

no other author could do. Weigel had years of incomparable access to John Paul II and many people in his inner circle. He puts that access to good use, showing us why the late pope has been dubbed "John Paul the Great."

From his early charge: "Be not Afraid," to the elderly man unable even to speak, Weigel shows us a real human being—a genius with a sense of humor and a warrior with a tender heart. His kenosis (self emptying) powerfully contradicted the modern culture of narcissism and inspired millions to live not for themselves but for others.

In these final years, John Paul dealt with many difficult issues: the sex scandal, science and life issues, calls for his resignation, the European Union's denial of its Christian heritage, Islamic terrorism, and the war in Iraq, just to name a few. All of these issues presented challenges for the Church and for the elderly man who led it.

There were also significant calls for liturgical reform. When Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council in 1962, he expected it to ignite a new Pentecost. Instead, the liturgical reform of Vatican II "was followed rather rapidly...by diminished Mass attendance throughout Europe and North America and deteriorated sense of Eucharistic amazement." Pope John Paul tried to counter these forces, at least in part, with the Great Jubilee of 2000.

Between the opening of the door at St. Peter's Basilica on December 24, 1999 and the end of the Jubilee year, Pope John Paul II presided over numerous ceremonies, and he made a historic pilgrimage to Israel. On that five-day visit, the pope visited holy sites and met with Israel's political leaders and chief rabbis. While there, he blessed Israel, expressed support for a Palestinian homeland, and offered an apology to God for failings of the Church. It was widely regarded as another triumph for the aging pope.

Weigel chronicles the tumultuous last years as the once avid sportsman gradually succumbs to Parkinson's and old age. He details John Paul's remarkable courage and resilience as the eyes of the world were upon him. Through his own suffering, he bore witness to the inherent dignity of the human person and came to embody the trials of billions of people across the globe.

After a moving account of John Paul's final moments, Weigel

turns to the third section of his book in which he provides an in-depth analysis of John Paul's inner strength and considers his historical importance. No one will be surprised to find that Weigel considers John Paul to have had "the most consequential pontificate in centuries."

John Paul once wrote: "They try to understand me from the outside. But I can only be understood from the inside." That is probably true, but Weigel gives us the best description that can be had from the outside. Karol Wojtyla cared little for material possessions or comforts. He was nourished by prayer—a "lifelong dialogue of faith." Weigel calls it *metanoia*—a process of repentance or penance leading to a change of heart from sin to the practice of virtue. This gave John Paul the strength he exhibited throughout his life.

John Paul left behind a legacy of ideas too long to list, but Weigel addresses many, including his defense of reason, teachings on sexual ethics, and views on interreligious relations. Weigel, a just war theorist who disagreed with John Paul on the American military operation in Iraq, feels that the late pope should have done more to bring that doctrine in line with the realities of modern warfare.

*The End and the Beginning* is a fitting completion to Weigel's *Witness to Hope*. Taken together, these books serve as the authoritative chronicle and comprehensive assessment of John Paul II's life.

*Ron Rychlak is the author of the revised and expanded volume Hitler, the War, and the Pope. He is a professor at the University of Mississippi School of Law and a member of the Catholic League's Board of Advisors.*