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A REVIEW ARTICLE

WITNESS TO HOPE: THE BIOGRAPHY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

George Weigel

New York: HarperCollins (1999)

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There is no real doubt that when the history of church in the twentieth century is written by scholars, and some have already undertaken this daunting task, one of the foremost figures of the century has to be the Pole Karol Wojtyla, better known as Pope John Paul II. His papacy has left a mark on the world that will impact people and nations for decades to come. Till now several notable biographies have been written about John Paul II. *Witness to Hope* is surely the best of them. And it is especially important to evangelicals, as I will attempt to show.

George Weigel, a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington, D. C., is an astute commentator on American public life as well as a formidable Roman Catholic ethicist and theologian. He is also a clear thinker and an extraordinary writer. In this present volume he has plainly written the finest book to date on the life of Karol Wojtyla, the Polish pope, John Paul II.

This is a weighty book. It is also a highly readable one. Weigel is experienced in giving the background to a story, and it shows, especially in the first third of his book. Here

he tells the story of Karol Wojtyła's (pronounced Voy-tee-wah) life up to his election to the papacy. He demonstrates, especially in this portion of the book, that a good biography of a living person is still possible. Weigel addresses, with profound and even entertaining insight, twentieth-century Polish society, the doctrinal development of modern Roman Catholicism, the growth of the Vatican's foreign policy, and, in general, the truly important issues that touched the entire world in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The life of John Paul II is deeply intertwined with the religious, philosophical and political concerns of the past three decades. Weigel approaches his subject from every conceivable angle, and does so superbly. But all of this is only the tip of a huge iceberg, a tour de force in modern biography! I have only one major complaint with Weigel's work. I had trouble putting the book aside for any period of time and thus had to forego other pressing interests for several days.

Karol Józef Wojtyła was born in Wadowice (Poland) May 18, 1920, just months *before* the Red Army invaded Europe and was repelled at Vistula, a battle Poles collectively remember to this day. Thus began the Second Polish Republic, a period of some fifteen years, during which an entire generation was profoundly altered. Because of this Polish repulsion of Lenin's troops, Karol Wojtyła would grow up a free man in a truly free Poland, "a member of the first generation of Poles, to be born in freedom in 150 years. An experience he would never forget, it became part of the foundations on which he, too, would change the history of the twentieth century" (18).

Poland, thought of by most of us in the West as being situated in "eastern Europe," has in fact been at the very center of all European life and history for centuries. This is true both religiously and culturally. A Roman Catholic

nation for centuries, Poland has been far more tolerant of diverse religious expression than almost any other place in Europe from the sixteenth century to the present. And the most important tie that Poland has maintained with the West, for over ten centuries, is its Christianity, as expressed in a deeply rooted Roman Catholicism. Poles are, if anything, a deeply spiritual people with an intense awareness of both their own history and faith. Young Wojtyła grew up with this uniquely Polish awareness.

Wojtyła's childhood home was an ancient town in the foothills of the Beskidy Mountains. The people "were small businessmen, lawyers, tradesmen, farmers, and officials of the local provincial administration" (23). They also worked in the town's factories. Among them was a sizable population of Jews, a fact that also deeply influenced young Karol.

Wojtyła's parents were married in 1904. A son, Edmund, was born in 1906 and a daughter, who died in infancy, some years later. From 1919, Karol's father, a lieutenant in the Polish army, and mother would live on the second floor of an apartment across the street from St. Mary's Church. Here, in this very tiny apartment, was to be born the man (called "Lolek" by family and friends) who would influence the world many years hence.

Lolek was a precocious child who loved people and school. His tranquil, peaceful, happy childhood was soon, however, to be tragically interrupted. In 1929, his mother, who had often been ill, died of kidney failure at age forty-five. Much has been made of the impact of this death upon the life of Karol Wojtyła. Some suggest, for example, that his deeply held Marian devotion is fueled by a kind of displaced maternal affection. Others suggest that his present doctrinal views on women and Holy Orders are a result of his mother's death at such an early age. Weigel thoughtfully concludes:

While his silence about his mother's death no doubt reflects his sense of privacy, it may also suggest that Karol Wojtyła, as an adult, retained few memories of the woman who died when he was nine years old. In a post-Freudian world, simple explanations can seem like evasions. But one explanation of why the Virgin in Michelangelo's *Pieta* does not look at her dead son is that the sculptor, whose mother died when he was six, did not remember what a mother's gaze looked like. John Paul II's silence about his mother may well indicate nothing other than a relative paucity of memories about her, as one of his closest aides once observed. On a table in his bedroom, in both the papal apartment in the Vatican and at his summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, Pope John Paul II keeps a small photographic portrait of his parents, taken some time after their wedding. This is how he remembers his mother (29).

Many memories of youth and adolescence did fill the life of the man who would be pope. He was, in his adolescence, to become an excellent dramatist, a soccer player of some ability and an avid hiker (which he remained into his eighth decade of life until his bout with Parkinson's Disease). By the time he entered university he had been saturated in Polish romantic literature and drama. His love for the theater continues to the present. Of all the influences upon his life, however, none compares with that of his father, the elder Karol, whom Weigel says was his most influential "mentor" (29). Jerzy Kluger, the pope's childhood friend, has noted that the elder Wojtyła was a "just man" who transmitted to his young son the responsibility to live accordingly. This sense of justice has impacted the whole of Wojtyła's intellectual and personal life.

Among the many wonderful things that John Paul II remembers about his father (who taught him several languages as well as personal respect for peoples of all backgrounds) the one that stands out, at least to me, is this—he

recalls his dad as a "man of constant prayer" (30). Whether at night, or in the early morning, young Karol's first impressions of his father were that of the man on his knees in silent prayer. Father and son read the Scriptures together regularly and prayed the rosary. The influence of Karol's father cannot be overstated at this point, especially to a generation of Americans where dads leave little or no spiritual impression upon their sons. Weigel writes:

Captain Karol Wojtyła, a religious educator by example as much as by admonition and instruction, taught his son that the Church is more than a visible institution. The "mystery of the Church," its "invisible dimension," is "larger than the structure and organization of the Church," which are "at the service of the mystery." By the testimony of the son, it was his father's way of life that first planted in the future pope the idea that *the life of faith has first to do with interior conversion* (emphasis mine, 30).

From his youth John Paul II has specifically noted that the saying of Jesus to his disciples, "Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32) deeply influenced him in dealing with fear. He has noted that Jesus did not prepare his disciples for easy success! He suggests that the heart of the gospel can be seen in this truth.

The Gospel is not a promise of easy success. It does not promise a comfortable life to anyone. It makes demands and, at the same time, it is a *great promise*—the promise of eternal life for man, who is subject to the law of death, and the promise of victory through faith for man, who is subject to many trials and setbacks (quoted from *Crossing the Threshold*, 30).

John Paul II has written in his autobiographical recol-

lections upon his childhood that he was "above all" grateful to his father. "We never spoke about a vocation to the priesthood, but *his example was in a way my first seminary, a kind of domestic seminary*" (31).

In addition to this positive paternal influence young Wojtyła's life was marked by a further tragedy in 1932. His older brother, Edmund, who had become a physician and had an immense influence upon young Karol, died at age 26. Lolek was only 12 at the time. One, who knew him well, writes that, "Lolek was struck even harder by his brother's wholly unexpected death than by the death of his mother" (32).

As I noted above nearly one third of Weigel's masterful biography is devoted to these early years and the unfolding of Wojtyła's life *before* he became pope in 1978. For those who know little of this amazing man's background, or of the history of Poland, this portion of Weigel's book will be far and away the most moving and interesting part of the story. Weigel provides a telling measure of the man himself—of his piety, devotion, love, and commitment to justice!

The story of Wojtyła's first fifty-eight years of life is remarkable, notwithstanding the fact that these years strategically prepared him to become the most influential pope in centuries. These years are also interesting in that they give us an unusually insightful look at Poland between the two great wars. What was life really like under the Nazis and the Communists? What personal struggles did Wojtyła face as he served under repression and extreme hardship? How does faith intersect with everyday life itself under an oppressive social and political system? And who were the men and women who were the true friends of Karol Wojtyła long before the world knew him as the pope?

One example of the above is Archbishop Adam Stefan Sapieha, the true leader of Poland during the fateful and

dark days of World War II and the Nazi invasion. Sapieha remained the role model of both religious and moral leadership that John Paul II has followed for twenty-two-plus years. Weigel explains how the influence of this "uncrowned king of Poland" still marks every aspect of the life of this courageous pope. At this point I share the insightful comments of another reviewer, who writes of Sapieha, and his great influence upon Wojtyła:

The Nazi governor of Poland, Hans Frank, looking for some sliver of legitimacy, forced Sapieha to invite him to the archbishop's palace. Sapieha duly issued the invitation, and the two men sat alone at this formal table—to be served black bread made from acorns, jam made from beets, and ersatz coffee. While Frank glazed down the table, the archbishop explained that this was the ration available on the food coupons distributed by the Nazis, and he couldn't risk dealing on the black market. Living through the most unfortunate decades in Polish history, the future pope was astonishingly fortunate in his mentors and associates. And if he had not become, at age fifty-eight, the 264th bishop of Rome—if George Weigel had written merely a biography of a man named Karol Wojtyła—it would still be very much worth reading.¹

Wojtyła's personal training continued in the late 1940s, under the watchful oversight of Cardinal Sapieha, who desired that Karol pursue doctoral studies. He urged him to study theology at the Pontifical Athenaeum of St. Thomas Aquinas (known as "the Angelicum") He set out to follow this advice in the fall of 1946. Before this could take place, however, Cardinal Sapieha put Wojtyła on a fast track toward ordination, which was culminated on November 1, 1946. A few weeks later he left for studies in Rome, his first time outside Poland, and life at the Belgian College where the "new theology" of Yves Congar, Jean Danielou and

Henri de Lubac would become part of the ongoing discussions of the residents. The great influence of these men and their ideas came to fruition at Vatican II, where Wojtyła, then bishop of Kraków, would play a significant role in liturgical reform, among other matters.

As Wojtyła traveled across Europe he saw a different Catholicism than that of his Polish experience. He became convinced that a more pastorally active and evangelically engaged laity was needed more than ever. He wrote of the need to restore confession to its proper place and saw the need for true pastors to again become "a prisoner of the confessional" if they were to serve their people faithfully (84).

In his philosophical and theological studies Wojtyła was greatly influenced by learning the basics of the church's theological traditions. He would, by this exposure, be able to understand vital issues *before* he entered into the critical temper that was fast becoming so popular in academic circles. In his doctoral thesis he examined St. John of the Cross's understanding of faith. The theology of this Carmelite mystic would play a major role in the direction Wojtyła's life would eventually take. In his dissertation Wojtyła's emphasis was upon the "personal nature of the human encounter with God, in which believers transcend the boundaries of their creaturely existence in such a way that they become more truly and completely themselves. This encounter with the living God is not for mystics only. It is the center of every Christian life" (85). He reasoned, in his doctoral work, that the highest wisdom we attain will not allow us to "objectivize" our knowledge of God, for we simply do not come to know God, as we come to know an object (say a tree, a car or any other thing). We come to know the living God as we come to know another person, that is through "mutual self-giving" (86). God comes to live within us and we come to dwell, in some sense, "within God," all without losing the radical difference that still

must exist between the creature and the Creator. This understanding of faith is essential to everything we know about John Paul II and his theological view of relationship with Christ. Weigel states that Wojtyła's dissertation drew three further conclusions: (1) Because we cannot know God "objectively" there are *limits* to rationality and reason in knowing God. (2) Faith is a *personal encounter* with God and does not allow us to comprehend God intellectually, which would mean faith would enjoy a position superior to God, which is impossible. (3) *Mystical communion* is the right way to understand our communion with God, not an "emotional high." This mystical communion utterly transcends all normal conventions of creaturely existence.

Leaving Rome, in the summer of 1948, Karol Wojtyła's preparation for the life for which he believed he had been chosen by God was to begin in earnest. In some of the most impressive writing in Weigel's account he concludes:

Events had chiseled him into an early maturity. Having come relatively late to his vocational decision after anticipating living his Christian life as a layman, he was a priest intimately familiar with the lives of ordinary people. He was a Polish patriot, but like his father before him, he was untouched by xenophobia. He knew the special cultural and intellectual connection between his country and the universal church, even as he thought that his hard-pressed country might have something to offer the West that had betrayed it twice in six years. He had learned totalitarianism from inside. As he later said, "I participated in the great experience of my contemporaries—humiliation at the hands of evil." Yet he found a path beyond humiliation and bitterness. It led him to the altar, where he had pledged to spend himself in service to his people (87).

His seminary confessor recalls that the young Wojtyła was a man "who loved easily." This capacity would mark

the rest of his life. He has loved people easily, even the man who sought to take his own life!

His first parish assignment came in 1948. It was that of a country curate (an assistant pastor). He also served a pioneering student chaplaincy in Kraków. His love for writing, reading, and poetry grew during these early years. The doctor of theology degree was granted to him by the Jagiellonian University Faculty of Theology in Poland on December 26, 1948. Shortly after this time he published his first essay, on the French worker-priest movement. He also wrote his first play. He even began, during these years, to explore the beauty of human love. This eventually led him to write one of the most biblically sensitive and theologically sound statements on human sexuality ever penned, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993). He would also write his first poetry during these years.

But Karol Wojtyła might have been just another Polish prelate, albeit one with impressive credentials in a number of areas, had not the virtually unthinkable taken place in 1978. On October 16, as everyone now knows, he was elected the first Polish pope in the history of the church. Remarkably, he was the first non-Italian pope in 455 years, dating to the time *before* the famous Council of Trent! Here Weigel's work may be less moving but is surely not less important. He tells the story of John Paul II's public life in a comprehensive manner, leaving out no important detail. At times the work becomes a bit tedious and encyclopedic. Some might choose to read this part of the book more selectively. The endless explanations of papal visits to various countries, papal pronouncements on various issues (some are quite important), and papal debates, does detract somewhat from the book's earlier, and more affecting, style. But don't let this put you off. There is some compelling material here, material that evangelical and Catholic readers must discuss.

Weigel's work is important for a number of reasons. He explores new information about John Paul II's role in the fall of communism, a role that clearly is of major consequence. He also presents new information on the pope's role in the Vatican/Israel negotiations of 1991-92. He engages in a lively discussion of the pope's role in the fall of dictatorships in the Philippines, Chile, Nicaragua, and Paraguay, all in the 1980s. He explores the more recent papal visit to Cuba. Previously unpublished correspondence with Leonid Brezhnev, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Deng Xiaoping are also included.

Of more interest to evangelical readers will be the discussion of this pope's passionate ecumenism. Weigel treats this element of John Paul II's legacy as thoroughly as any writer I have read. What actually motivates this pope, and the Vatican, in reaching out to evangelicals, to Jews and even to Muslims?

It must be kept in mind that Karol Wojtyła, as previously noted, played a significant role in Vatican II. He has consistently rejected "progressive" (read "liberal") efforts to use Vatican II as a means for *diluting* the church's distinctive doctrinal foundations. This was evident in the most recent doctrinal formulation of Cardinal Ratzinger, which the pope openly approved.

But this pope has also clearly rejected all efforts to take the church back to its earlier distrust for modernity. One thinks, for example, of John Paul II's response to Darwinian ideas as well as his rejection of efforts to reverse the liturgical changes made since the historic council of the 1960s.

For John Paul II, theology is an important discipline. It does *not* stand outside the church "like a neutral observer examining a specimen. Theology was an 'ecclesial science' that 'grows in the Church and works on the Church'" (358). Weigel writes that this pope believes, "A good theo-

logical education . . . did not begin with critically dismantling the tradition. It began with learning the tradition" (358). True theology, for John Paul II, is an encounter with the living Christ and is, in his own words, a way to "convey to the young the living experience of him" (358).

One of John Paul's most fruitful contributions to modern Christian theology, in general, has been his view of history and human culture. How are we to understand the role of Christianity in the modern world? Weigel observes: "As a Christian convinced that the Gospel revealed the truth about humanity and its destiny, *he believed that God was in charge of history. This freed the Church to act in history in a singular way*" (emphasis mine, 296).

A number of doctrinal initiatives could be explored in a lengthy review article such as this, but I will leave to the serious reader the task of discovering many of these in *Witness to Hope* itself. (A rich and complete index is extremely useful.) One eloquent bit of analysis occurs toward the end of Weigel's overview. Borrowing from one of the most biblical Catholic theologians (Hans Urs von Balthazar) of the twentieth century, Weigel concludes:

The conventional critique of John Paul II, which so often misrepresents his thinking, does so because it misses the relationship between tradition and innovation, the stable and the dynamic, in the Church. . . . The canon of the Bible is fixed forever, but Scripture is not a dead record of the past. Scripture enables the Word of God to be received freshly by every generation of Christians. The sacraments are not merely traditional rituals, repeated because previous generations of Christians performed them. The sacraments enable contemporary Christians to live the great mysteries of the faith—the life, death, and resurrection of Christ—*anew*. The purpose of authority in the Church is not to impede creativity, but to ensure that Christians do not settle for mediocrity. Authority is meant to help the individual Christian hold

himself or herself accountable to the one supreme criterion of faith, the living Christ. Doctrine is not excess baggage down the Christian journey. Doctrine is the vehicle that enables the journey to take place at all (853).

Though serious evangelical theologians would necessarily challenge, on biblical grounds, this sacramental association of the mystical Christ with the Roman church, we could well profit by Weigel's insightful reflection at this point. As postmodernity threatens to take away our own teachers and best thinkers we seem to have lost, or at least misplaced, our confidence in "the relationship between tradition and innovation, the stable and the dynamic. . . ." This loss is great. Serious efforts to regain it are underway. One can only hope that they will bear intellectual and moral fruit soon. The life and thought of John Paul provides an insightful dialogue partner for us. We would do well to at least have the discussion.

Considerable attention has been devoted to John Paul's ecumenical initiatives. *Witness to Hope* extensively deals with these initiatives. These efforts could never have been attempted until after Vatican II. Prior to 1960 the Roman Catholic Church kept its distance, with extreme caution, from all discussions of her relationship to other church bodies, arguing that all others must return to Rome for there to be any serious discussion of mutual Christian concerns. There can be no doubt that the Decree on Ecumenism (1964) radically altered this direction. And this pope has, in particular, made huge strides toward reconciliation with other churches. All of this should interest any thoughtful Christian leader. It invites each of us, if to do nothing else, to join the dialogue with our biblical concerns.

But where do evangelicals fit into this discussion? George Weigel, who himself is a friend of several leading

North American evangelicals, makes only passing reference to the pope's ecumenical interests with regard to evangelical Christians. He writes:

John Paul's vigorous defense of the right-to-life and his vibrant public witness to Christian truth have helped strengthen the Church's dialogue with evangelical Protestants, the rapidly growing sector of world Protestantism in Latin America, eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia (858).

Weigel further notes that:

The independent American theological initiative, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," has developed a joint statement of commitment to public moral renewal and a joint statement of belief about the meaning of salvation, both of which would have been difficult to imagine without the ecumenical witness of John Paul II (858-59).

The original initiative (known simply as ECT), is a much-ballyhooed document among evangelicals which continues to divide missions and ministries. It is seen quite differently from the Catholic perspective. It is both unofficial and only exploratory in their framework of thought. (Evangelicals have little or no place for such a *process*, which is actually one of our weaknesses.) John Paul is aware that this dialogue exists and he openly welcomes it. He is also acutely aware that many differences still divide our respective fellowships, differences that will not go away easily in the light of how evangelicals trust the Holy Scripture as final authority and use it practically to articulate their faith and practice.

As this pope's life and ministry seem to be drawing to an end, given both his age and infirmities, how should we understand John Paul's life overall, especially his papacy?

Weigel suggests the pope's *personal* answer came in Portugal at the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima on May 12-13, 1982. John Paul visited the shrine on the fifth anniversary of the assassination attempt upon his life. He was there to give thanks to God and Mary for his life being spared. Weigel writes, "Arriving in Fatima, the Pope succinctly summarized his view of life, history, and his own mission in one pregnant phrase: 'in the designs of Providence there are no mere coincidences'" (440).

John Paul is clearly a man of faith and action. His papacy is one in which the church has sought to engage the world at every practical level, while retaining the essence of Roman Catholicism as it has been traditionally confessed and understood. He is *not* a progressive liberal. Just as clearly he is *not* an evangelical with a very thin Roman Catholic veneer in form and practice. To conceive of him or his papacy in such terms is, at very best, silly. At worst such a conception is seriously misleading. John Paul is a man of faith. He is a man of prayer and personal devotion. He is a trained philosopher and a careful theologian. He understands his Christian faith through traditional Catholic categories of form and liturgical expression. His efforts for ecumenism are both genuine and impressive. His dealing with totalitarianism has been direct and amazingly effective. He believes, with genuine humility, that God has led him throughout his life, both to speak and to act. He does not believe in mere accidents. The attempt to take his life had come on the anniversary of the Marian apparition. He came, as I noted, to remember this providence. His life, indeed the whole world, was part of the unfolding plan of God's saving purposes in human history. This message, "to his mind, was the message the Second Vatican Council wanted to take to a modern world frightened by what seemed to be the purposelessness of life" (440).

Author

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Notes

1. William Kristol, "The Man of Our Age: George Weigel's Biography of John Paul II," in *The Weekly Standard*, October 18, 1999.