

The pope of liberty and dignity

By REV. GERALD ZANDSTRA

I am an ordained Protestant of the Reformed or Dutch Calvinist persuasion. My experience with Catholics, specifically Polish Catholics, began in the neighborhood in which I was raised.

Most on my block were either Dutch Reformed or Polish Catholics. The line between us was bright and clear. Each attended his or her own church and school (non-public) and each kept to his or her own kind. A marriage between children would be a scandal for both families. Nothing in my childhood challenged this reality. Little in my college or various seminary experiences countered what I learned in my youth.

Catholicism, especially the papacy, was discussed primarily in courses focusing on the early church or the Middle Ages. Having served several churches for a period of 12 years, I joined the Acton Institute in January 2001. This would be my first significant experience working with Catholics, as the co-founders of the Institute were a Catholic priest and a Catholic economist. Roughly half our staff is Catholic. The other half is made up of Protestants of various stripes.

As I became friends with my co-workers, levels of trust grew. I was able to ask all the questions I had occasionally wondered about but had never had the opportunity to ask a real, breathing Catholic. I discovered much. Some of the theological differences were significant and remain so. Some of what I thought were theological differences were merely caricatures on my part. Mostly, I began to develop a strong interest in this Polish freedom-fighter who became the pope.

Several biographies later and a deeper understanding of recent history led from an interest to a profound appreciation for Pope John Paul II. John

Paul II was the pope of human liberty and human dignity. His upbringing in Poland under the rule of various forms of totalitarianism taught him a lesson that he would never forget, even in his death.

Human life, no matter what a particular person's abilities or inabilities, is precious and must be protected. When I first heard his comparison between the "culture of life" and the "culture of death," I was struck by the power of the two concepts.

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The culture of life is that which upholds the dignity of life in the context of freedom. All human institutions are judged from the standpoint of their contribution to this culture of life and the context of freedom.

The culture of death is ominous, utilitarian, destructive and treats life as a commodity, or worse. The individual person's dignity is subsumed by the needs of the state or society or some other greater good or evil.

John Paul's vision of society holds things in tension. He was about neither complete freedom nor enforced virtue. Freedom and virtue are intertwined. They are dependent on one another. Liberty is the context within which people make virtuous choices. Liberty, for John Paul, was not some ethereal concept. The 1991 encyclical "Centesimus Annus" was a call to Catholics and, indeed, to all Christians, to take freedom seriously, especially in the realm of economics. It is not an endorsement of a particular economic structure. His condemnation of

communism was matched by his fear that those emerging from totalitarianism would immerse themselves in consumerism.

The pope's vision and perspective was always broader than particular issues in a given political or economic situation. What is remarkable is its vision of liberty and morality. Christians in business are not participating in necessary evil. Rather, they are called to elevate their thinking so that their work became their vocation and one of the prime means by which they serve God.

John Paul knew that pervasive welfare states could never match the salvific power of private charity for both the wealthy and the poor. Liberation theology, with its bizarre mixture of Marxism and Christian thought, could only lead to greater oppression and poverty. Communism would fall because, at its root, it was morally and economically bankrupt which matched bad anthropology with faulty economics. It was only a matter of time.

In many ways, despite theological differences, I found in the life and thought of John Paul an ally and a well-formed defense of a society that is both free and virtuous. I have two regrets upon hearing of his decline and death. The first is that I did not have an opportunity to meet him. The second is that I did not learn more of him earlier in my academic career. Protestants, in the coming weeks and months, will have an opportunity to meet him and know him through numerous articles and books. I hope that they take the opportunity to do so.

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