

IN HONOR OF JOHN PAUL II

A tribute by Michael Novak
The IRI Freedom Dinner
May 18, 2005

Recently, I received two e-mails from strangers who identified themselves as evangelical Christians, who wanted to tell me that they counted John Paul II as their pope, too. One of them wrote that John Paul II was one of the most Christ-like men since the time of Christ himself. Since that was his main task—to be a stand-in (vicar) for Christ—I think the Pope would have found that praise excessive, but would have liked its direction. Being vicar of Christ was his job number one.

And so, in a sense, it was something of an accident that this Pope also became one of the greatest forces for human liberty in recent centuries. His primary interest was not political, his primary role was not political, his primary love was not political. Yet off to the side, as it were, the political winds stirred by his pontificate reached hurricane strength.

His sheer presence as Bishop of Rome made it impossible for any abuse of human rights in Poland and surrounding territories—any clubbing of a priest with iron bars, any beating of a dockworker in Gdansk, any jailing of a journalist in Slovakia—to slip by without an international spotlight being flicked upon it from the Vatican. His sheer presence opened up vast spaces of civil society in Poland and its neighbors.

And this man was gutsy enough to thrust himself into every one of those nations, in order to create still more opportunities for people to begin to live and to think and to act as free women and men. “Be not afraid!” he said.

The light of freedom, Karol Wojtyla believed from a very young age, is a flame within us that comes directly from God, a light from the Creator’s own inner light, which makes us come alive with insight, and gives us the power to choose our own destiny. In this, we are the creatures most like God in all of creation.

When he was just 19, in 1939, stepping outside the Wawel Cathedral where he had just assisted at Mass, the young Karol Wojtyla saw the first German Stukas banking, screaming in, and strafing homes along the river bank below. That is where his widowed father lived, and he ran downhill until his breath burned his lungs to be certain that his father was unharmed. Young Karol learned through resistance that inner liberty can survive even under occupation and totalitarian control.

But he also knew that humans do not live by inner life alone. As he matured, he came to see how rich and complex liberty is. From inner liberty, one urgently wants political liberty. Given political liberty, one learns very soon that without economic liberty—liberty from poverty—people

will not long be satisfied merely with the chance to vote every two or four years. And he learned also that neither political nor economic liberty can come into existence, or be long maintained, without cultural, moral, spiritual, and religious liberty—liberty of conscience, enterprise, ideas, the spirit, science and the arts.

Karol Wojtyla was not just a holy man and a fearless bishop he was also a professional philosopher and a strong and original thinker. We honor him not only in gratitude for how his fearlessness helped to alter the map of Europe. And not only for how he helped to bring down the Berlin Wall, and to provoke the collapse of the Soviet Empire by pointing to its spiritual emptiness; in short, not only for his actions in expanding the dimensions of liberty in our world---but also for the volumes of his written teachings about liberty.

The letters he wrote to the world—those short treatises called “encyclicals”—will long outlive him. We recall with particular gratitude his letter of 1991, “The Hundredth Year,” summarizing the lessons about political, economic, and cultural liberty that had been learned by the Popes of the bloody and suffering last hundred years. Here, in particular, he introduced the concept of “moral ecology,” that complex of image, story, emotion, passion, spirit, and attitude within which alone liberty can come into its own. This is a dimension of the free society, the cultural dimension, that the world has too long ignored.

Many at IRI also remember that John Paul II wrote with Cardinal Ratzinger, his successor, two great letters on the Christian understanding of liberty, addressed directly to the so-called “liberation theologians” of Latin America, who were introducing into Latin America the very same twisted lines of Marxist thinking that had so impoverished Europe. These two letters were intellectual demolitions of a very high order, bristling with shrewd and practical distinctions. When under the Reagan revolution, democracies arose all through Latin America, it turned out that the liberation theologians, having prepared themselves for marxism rather than for democracy, were as hollow as those letters pointed out.

In courageous action, in symbol, in deed, and in profound theorizing about the relations of democracy and human rights, John Paul II leapt to the front ranks of the great leaders for liberty in the 20th century. Wilson, Churchill, Roosevelt, Reagan, Thatcher— he belongs in their number. From the Philippines, through Chile and all of Latin America, including his memorable re-awakening of a long-repressed Cuba, and on through Africa, Asia, and then his own beloved Poland and Eastern Europe, John Paul II spread the inner fire of liberty, and helped to nudge, stir, and even open the exit door for several standard-bearers of oppression.

When he died just six weeks ago, the political world had a radically different shape than it had when he was elected Pope in 1978.

Today, on what would have been the 85th anniversary of his birth, May 18, 1920, it is fitting that we honor this good man.

Not many in the Twentieth Century, nor even in the three or four centuries before that, advanced the cause of political liberty more dramatically in more places on the planet. And that was not even John Paul II's first priority. That was, for him, an aside.