

The Passing of John Paul II: What Doesn't Change

Kevin T. Bauder

Today they bury Karol Wojtyla, and the world is beating a path to Rome. All humanity seems stricken with grief. The Catholics alone who are converging on Rome create a human ocean, but they are joined by many Protestants as well as by people from other religions and from no religion at all. There is some reason for this—Wojtyla was a great man in more than one respect. Even people who abominate the institution of the papacy might respect and even admire him.

At some levels the outpouring of emotion is understandable. Karol Wojtyla made a difference in the world. He helped to bring down communism. He halted the spread of Liberation Theology. He became a visible emblem of the yearning for peace on earth, even if his opposition to armed conflict was sometimes naïve. He provided vocal leadership on many moral issues (abortion, homosexuality, and pornography, among others), both within his own communion and within the world at large. He appeared to model simplicity and compassion. He manifested enormous courage, both in his opposition to communism and in his willingness to confront the liberal fringes of his own church. In many ways, Karol Wojtyla spoke to the sympathies of more than his Roman Catholic constituents.

The expressions of sorrow are understandable, but somewhat overdone. By suggesting for *Christianity Today* that “he was my pope, too,” and that “with his death I am even more of an orphan than the Christians in the Roman church,” Uwe Siemon-Netto moves from sentimentalism to silliness. This is more than the recognition of the man’s greatness (and he was great). This is misdefinition of the Christian faith and, implicitly, of the gospel itself.

While the world focuses upon the funeral of Karol Wojtyla, we do well to recall the teachings of the Roman church. Romanism has emphasized a certain core of doctrines ever since the Council of Trent. These teachings were not overturned by Vatican II, nor have they been dismissed or denied by any subsequent pope. *Aggiornamento* may have led to greater dialogue with other communions, but it has not fundamentally altered Romanism’s view of its own core teachings.

Fundamental to the Roman system is the denial of justification by grace alone through faith alone upon the basis of the imputed, alien righteousness of Christ alone. Romanism is predicated upon the inseparability of justification from sanctification. According to Roman soteriology, God does not deal in legal fictions. Therefore, He will not justify people (pronounce them righteous) until they are actually sanctified (they really are righteous or holy). Romanism denies that the sinner is credited with the righteousness of Christ. It makes salvation into a divine-human synergism. Therefore, its teachings constitute a blunt denial of the gospel.

In Romanism, salvation depends upon infused grace. Grace is mediated under the auspices of the Church through the sacraments. Baptism in particular is held to be indispensable. It regenerates, secures the forgiveness both of original sin and of all actual sins up to the point of its administration, and places an indelible mark upon the soul. And it does all of this *ex opere operato*. The mass is a re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ which revolves around the elements being turned into the literal body and blood of Christ. This theory of the sacraments has not changed substantially in centuries.

The Marian doctrines of Catholicism have not been weakened since Vatican II. If anything, they have been strengthened. The perpetual virginity of Mary, her immaculate conception, her bodily assumption, and her station as co-mediatrix are more firmly established in Roman theology than ever. John Paul II was widely known for his devotion to Mary, and many of the “faithful” speculated that he would use his papal authority to declare her to be co-redemptrix.

The Roman Catholic view of church authority remains essentially unaltered. The Bible is held to be infallible, though Catholics are no longer sure what that means. It is recognized as authoritative, but it is not the sole authority. Alongside the Bible stands the teaching of the Magisterium as an equivalent authority. In fact, the Magisterium is practically superior to Scripture because only the Magisterium possesses the authority to interpret Scripture. Besides the Bible and the Magisterium, the Pope is held to be infallible when he speaks from his official office, though he remains fallible when he expresses his opinions as a private theologian.

The Roman theory of the church has not changed fundamentally, though the language in which that theory is expressed has shifted somewhat. The Roman theory of the church may be contrasted with two other theories of the church. The Landmark theory (invented during the 19th Century) holds that the true church is visible and local. The Evangelical theory (held by historic Protestants, including mainstream Baptists) holds that the true church is invisible and universal. The Roman theory affirms that the true church is universal and visible, and equates it specifically the Roman communion. In the Roman theory, the church essentially consists in the bishops, who are held to be successors of the apostles. Thus, the true church may be defined to include all the successors of the apostles who are in communion with the successor of Peter, the bishop of Rome. Anglicanism and Eastern Orthodoxy can be recognized as separated churches, for they also have the apostolic succession even though they are not in communion with the bishop of Rome. Protestant denominations are not recognized as churches at all, but as “ecclesial communities.”

All of these teachings are still formally held as principles of Romanist theology. Unlike American evangelicals, Roman Catholics tend to take their theology seriously. While they are willing to discuss these ideas cordially enough, they are not willing to negotiate about them. Any theological negotiation with Rome is premised upon the assumption that Rome’s interlocutors must make the concessions. Unfortunately, many American evangelicals have been willing to do exactly that.

Karol Wojtyla's personal charisma was massive, his learning profound, his courage inspiring, and his integrity unimpeachable. When he became John Paul II, however, he ceased to be a private individual. He became the embodiment of Romanism. He did this knowingly, willingly, and officially. Whatever personal affection we might feel toward him (and it is possible to feel some), we cannot simply grieve for him as for a mere individual. He has become inseparable from the institution that he governed. That institution, as we are being reminded daily, commands spiritual authority over and claims spiritual responsibility for over one billion human beings. We must never allow ourselves to forget that Romanism is a systematic denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ, perpetuated by an enormously powerful, wealthy, and prestigious organization.

Romanism denies the gospel. No person can rightly be called a Christian who professes its doctrines. No leader of the Roman institution should ever be accorded status as a Christian by any person who claims loyalty to the gospel of Christ. The points at which Roman Catholicism and the Bible disagree are not minor, secondary, peripheral, or incidental. They cut to the heart of the Faith. To downplay this difference is to demean the importance of the gospel itself.