

April 3, 2005

Eulogy for our Pope

When I was a young boy growing up during the harshest years of communism in Poland my family told me the following prophecy: “Poland will be free when there will be a Polish Pope and a Chinaman will give water to his horse from the Vistula River”. In those days, after an eternal succession of Italian Popes, it was unthinkable that one of our own countrymen would be selected as head of the Catholic Church. But we Poles believe in miracles and miracles do happen. Poland was overjoyed when Karol Wojtyla became John Paul II and reigned over us for 26 years.

When he left us the light went out in the world. He proved himself to be a figure of extraordinary courage, charisma and humanity. He made it plain from the day he became Pope that he intended to be more than a mere ceremonial figure. He said: “I think that God raised me to become pope to do something for the world.” And that he did. In a secularizing, materialistic world that was forgetting about God he raised the spirit of the world and stood on guard for morality to prevent evil forces from destroying our values and reasons for living.

To many, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, his teachings were often harsh and archaic. This was the Pope who denounced all forms of artificial contraception as a “serious sin that offends God”, who saw in abortion the seeds of “a new holocaust”, who called homosexuality “an intrinsic moral evil”. This was also the Pope who said a decisive no to the marriage of priests and said that no woman would ever be ordained.

He was also the Pope who preached against the Persian Gulf wars, who denounced the arms trade and condemned the death penalty, who deplored the “idolatry market” and questioned the predatory nature of global capitalism, who spoke for human rights and helped undermine dictators from Chile and Haiti to the Philippines. Most unforgettably, this was our Polish Pope whose travels to his imprisoned native land helped bring down Soviet-backed communism and he contributed to the collapse of Communist control throughout Europe.

Those who denounced the Pope as reactionary forget that he did more than any other pontiff to make amends for past misdeeds. He apologized on behalf of the Church for aiding the slave trade, persecuting Galileo and many other things. He even forbade the Polish Church from active participation in political elections after the infamous events during the presidential election in 1990. It was his attempt to draw a line between the old, oppressive Church of the past and the modern, diverse Church of today.

To all those who have ever criticized our Pope, I would like to remind them of the words of the former president of the United States, Ted Roosevelt:

“It is not the critic who counts, nor the man who points out where the strong man stumbled, or where a doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to

the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs, and who comes up short again and again, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at best, knows the triumph of high achievement and who, at worst, if he fails, fails while daring greatly, so that his place will never be with those cold timid souls who never knew victory of defeat.”

For me the above statement best describes the life and work of our Pope, who even in his moment of death was victorious with his teachings. His call for Poland: “do not lose your spirit” has eternal meaning and will guide us towards the future and give us strength to continue fighting for a free Poland, whose image we carry in our Polish hearts. For us Poles, our Pope has departed to Heaven but he has not died.

As we mourn the departure of one of the greatest sons of Poland, we must also rejoice in the legacy that he has left to us. Examples of his compassion and his mercy should unite us Poles to rebuild Poland based on the spirit and morality that John Paul II has taught us. This is the only foundation that we can use. The alternative would be to rebuild a weak Poland based on materialistic liberal values, deceit and lies, contrary to our culture and Reason of State.

When all church bells start ringing during the funeral of our Great Pope, I will hear even louder his message to us Poles: “do not lose your spirit”. For this spirit is of the greatest value for us in this world.

Stan Tyminski
www.rzeczspolita.com