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John Paul II and the legacy of sanctity

John Paul II changed the world by "the simple force of an unquestionably good life". One year later, Bishop Javier Echevarría recalls the funeral of the pope and offers his reflections.

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No one has forgotten the wind blowing the pages of the gospel atop a plain wooden coffin in front of St. Peter's Basilica surrounded by, it seemed, the whole world: cardinals,

kings, presidents, ordinary folk, religious leaders, journalists and, above all, young people from every corner of the globe—and countless others watching from home. John Paul II had spent his life reaching out to the world, and in the end, at his funeral, the world reached back. Even for those who disagreed with him, the dying pope, by the simple force of an unquestionably good life, seemed to have become a silent magnet—a point of convergence for unity, charity, mutual respect and good will.

It is too soon to sum up so rich a life, yet looking back on last April's events, it is impossible not to ask the question: what will John Paul II's lasting impact be? The historian Christopher Dawson once said that "in order to change the world, a Christian has only to be," and it does not seem too soon to say that, as a

Christian, John Paul most definitely *was*.

Obviously, John Paul II changed the papacy's place in the world. In Rome today, you can feel the after-shock of his presence in the unprecedented crowds: in the lines to pray at his tomb and in the huge number of people coming to see his successor.

A pope of many words (homilies, speeches, encyclicals, poems, plays and books), John Paul knew, nonetheless, that his deepest impact would not be through something he wrote or said—however valuable that might be. Indeed perhaps what we recall most now are the symbolic actions: his kissing the ground as he disembarked from planes; his first trip to Poland; his visit to Ali Agca in prison; his spontaneous rapport with children and the sick; the silent eloquence of his suffering at the window of the papal apartment.

These are the tangible signs of something deeper.

Once, after a hospitalization, he spoke of the need he felt to preach “the gospel of suffering.” And as his end came in silence—amid the Holy Week liturgies that commemorate the mystery of death and the hope of eternal life—it was his suffering and his death that caught and commanded the world’s attention. Leadership, love, sacrifice and service have a language all their own, and millions of men and women who will never read a papal encyclical “heard” him clearly.

Above all, John Paul II wanted to leave the Church prepared to serve the world effectively in the new millennium, and he was keenly aware that the greatest gift that the Church can offer the world is nothing less than sanctity in the flesh

—saints, that is, always in demand and always too few.

One of the saints he canonized, Josemaria Escriva, had written: “These world crises are crises of saints”—no pious platitude, but both a spiritual truth and a cold, hard, secular fact. We all know who Augustine, Benedict, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas and Joan of Arc are and the impact they have had, and how many of us can name the popes and emperors who dominated the world’s stage during their lifetimes? Over the course of centuries, it is the saints who enter into the spiritual and intellectual bloodstream of the Church and the world, continually shaping the minds, hearts and lives of millions of people.

It is of utmost importance that John Paul II canonized more saints than all previous popes combined. Contemplating the new millennium

ahead, he wrote, “I thank the Lord that in these years He has enabled me to beatify and canonize a large number of Christians, and among them many lay people who attained holiness in the most ordinary circumstances of life. The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard of ordinary Christian living*: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction.” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*)

Those canonizations were not simply a recognition of heroic service and virtue, but also a much-needed reminder of every Christian’s calling. In short, the saints that John Paul has named—men and women who truly *were* Christians and therefore changed the world—are, for a world that never lacks crises, both a gift and a challenge. They stand as an impressive legacy of holiness—the pope’s greatest legacy perhaps,

unless of course he himself joins them one day, and his chief legacy becomes not the saints he made, but the saint he was.

+ **Javier Echevarría**

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