

**Assessment of the service of Pope John Paul II by Rev Prof James Haire,  
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I speak as one who has been Head of the Uniting Church in Australia, and also President of the National Council of Churches in Australia, but who has been intimately involved with the Roman Catholic Church for over a decade as co-chair of the National Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church in Australia and the Uniting Church in Australia, and also as a member of the Joint International Commission between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council. Our most recent international meeting was held in Krakow, in Southern Poland, where John Paul had been Archbishop and had been very friendly with the local Methodist minister. At that time, I travelled to many places around Krakow closely associated with his upbringing, including Czestochowa, the great shrine to the Virgin Mary, where the blood stained garment he was wearing at the time of the assassination attempt is now placed. I also visited Auschwitz and many other places associated with the world from which he came.

Pope John Paul II's contribution to the entire human community has been enormous. First and foremost, it has been his presentation of a quite distinct way of looking at the world, which has stood in stark contrast to much of the materialism of our time. He has stood starkly against the ideologies of the Twentieth Century West. The effects of his critique of Nazism, and then of Communism, are well known. There is no doubt that he stood at the very centre of the unravelling of the Soviet Empire. His close association with the *Solidarity* movement in Poland, and with Lech Walesa began the process by which the entire Communist world was shaken and ultimately the system destroyed.

However, that did not mean that he automatically allied himself with free market Capitalism. He warned constantly of the dangers of rampant materialism. He upheld the dignity of working people. And he stood strongly over against the uncontrolled effect of governments abandoning responsibility to the rule of market forces only.

This was perhaps the most overt expression of the social ethics which was inspired by his faith and his understanding of community. Central to all of this was his faith. He accurately expressed much of the self-understanding of his own Catholic faith. He believed deeply in the dependence of all human life on the grace and providence of God.

This faith was expressed in a number of ways. His immense energy was spent in the propagation of the faith around the world. In sheer numbers, the Catholic Church grew larger in his time than under any other previous Pope.

He was socially progressive in relation to many issues, but highly conservative in relation to doctrine and the expression of ministry and priesthood. This of course had come out of his own experience in Poland, where the discipline of the Church had been central to the survival of the whole nation, against the ideologies of Nazism, Communism, and consumerism. In the document *Dominus Iesus*, which caused some consternation among non-Roman Catholic churches, the central thrust in fact, was not about relations with other Christian bodies, but about the problematic nature of relativism in much of Western culture. Here, he stood firm against what he saw as the

excessive individualism and decadent nature of much Western society. To that extent he was profoundly counter-culture in relation to the dominant social trends, and even economic self-understanding, of the West. He also was critical of the Gulf Wars.

With regards to ecumenism, very considerable moves forward were made, as seen in the document *Ut Unim Sint*. Specific moves towards reconciliation with Orthodox churches, the Anglican Communion, and Protestant Churches were made. There were landmark events such as the historical signing of the Joint Declaration on Justification with the Lutheran Church and the rapprochement with the Orthodox churches. Much of this involved the reinterpretation of the Catholic position in relation to other churches, in language and gestures consistent with Catholic understanding but much more open and comprehensive than previously. Moreover, Pope John Paul II clearly placed the Catholic Church at the heart of the common search for Christian unity. The involvement of the Catholic Church in the 5<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Faith and Order in Spain in 1993 (which I attended), showed a remarkable move to shared responsibility for Christian unity along with other churches, despite the frustrations and the obstacles, for which the Catholic Church openly admits its joint responsibility. In the words of Cormack Murphy-O'Connor, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, at the Pope's funeral, the ecumenical movement now is road "from which there are no exits".

In relation to other faiths, John Paul made remarkable moves forward. The trauma of the Holocaust surrounded him all his life. As any one who has walked along the dreadful paths of Auschwitz knows, the *Showa* impinges on the heart of anyone who has experienced that place forever. John Paul's whole life had been caught up in this trauma. Jerzy Kluger, a Jewish childhood friend, said at the time of his death, "even when he was a young boy, he would already show great concern for social equality, especially for the Jews. This was very important to him from an early age." His visit to the synagogue in Rome marked the beginning of his moves towards reconciliation with the Jewish people. He was the first Pope to do so. World Jewish Congress President, Edgar Bronfman, said "Pope John Paul the II fundamentally changed two thousand years of relations between the Church and the Jewish People. He reached across millennial divides to promote mutual respect and understanding."

Equally, his moves towards reconciliation with the Muslim world were remarkable. He opened channels of communication between Islam and the Vatican, being the first Pope in history to enter a Mosque, which he did in Syria in 2001. As Sheikh Fehmi Naji of Melbourne said, "He was openminded and encouraged relationships between the various children of God on this earth, so we can live in this small village in peace and harmony."

There were, of course, limitations to John Paul's achievements, particularly in the understanding of urban Western Catholics, towards how the church should relate to contemporary society. Ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue have advanced considerably, although others would have wished that they might have advanced further. However, at the heart of all of this was his concern for human dignity and the place of people as children of God for whom there was divine providence and a divine plan. The end of his own life expressed this concern perfectly. It was to be in God's hands, not in accordance with some human view of how life was to be defined. For all

who have suffered, for all in pain, for all with burdens, the end of his earthly life, as much as when he was in full health, was a model of discipleship and hope.