

**AKSU JOURNAL**  
**OF HISTORY & GLOBAL**  
**STUDIES**

**Volume 2, Numbers 3&4, 2016**

**ISSN: 199 006X**

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Akwa Ibom State University,  
Nigeria.

*AJHGS*, Vol. 2, Nos. 3&4, 2016

*AKSU Journal of History & Global Studies (AJHGS)*,  
Volume 2, Numbers 3&4, 2016.

Published in Nigeria

Department of History & International Studies,

Faculty of Arts,

Akwa Ibom State University,

Obio Akpa Campus, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

(in collaboration with *Ibom Journal of History and International Studies*,

University of Uyo).

ISSN: 199 006X

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© December 2016.

Printed by Robertminder International Limited.

Late Pope John Paul II (1920 - 2005) and his  
Contributions to World Peace

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**Abstract**

Karol Józef Wojtyła, the youngest of the three children of Karol Wojtyła and Emilia Kaczorowska was born in 1920 in the Polish town of Wadowice. At the age of twenty, he had lost the company of his above siblings and to survive, he started to work as a messenger for a restaurant, manual labourer in a limestone quarry and later at solvay chemical factory to avoid deportation to Germany. He later knocked at the door of the Bishop's palace in kraków in 1942 and asked for permission to study for the sacred priesthood and was ordained a priest on All Saint's Day, November 1, 1946. A strong, passionate and charismatic priest and Bishop who later occupied the chair of St. Peter. Late John Paul II was the first non-Italian and the longest serving pope in 445 years. A pope that neither the church nor the world expected and whose 25 years was characterized by surprises which began on the very night of his election. He was a spiritual protagonist who master-minded the fall of communism in his native country Poland and also ensured the survival of Christianity into the third millennium. Late John Paul II wrote 14 papal encyclicals and taught about sexuality in what was referred to as the Theology of the Body. A conservative on doctrine and issues relating to human sexual reproduction, a strong opponent of homosexuality and ordination of women to sacred priesthood, the most travelled pope in history as he visited 129 countries during his pontificate. Late Pope John Paul II campaigned extensively for world peace, fought against mafia violence in southern Italy and regularly led diplomatic initiatives to negotiate peace in the Middle East. He was in the later part of his life regarded as a living saint. No wonder he was canonized a saint not long after his demise and referred to as Saint John Paul The Great.

## Introduction

Pope John Paul II, the longest serving pope in modern history was the first non-Italian pope in 445 years. He was known as a spiritual protagonist in two global transitions: the fall of European Communism which began in his native Poland in 1989, and the passage to the third millennium of Christianity<sup>1</sup>.

He was the Pope neither the church nor the world expected, the surprises that characterized his 26 years pontificate began on the very night of John Paul II's election. On October 16, 1978, the Catholic Church was in a state of spiritual shock. The 15 years papacy of Paul IV, whom many veteran churchmen considered the perfectly prepared Pope, had concluded in division and exhaustion. The bright promise of the Second Vatican Council was a fading memory. Pope Paul IV successor, John Paul I, seemed on the verge of revitalizing the papacy when he died after a mere thirty-three days in office. To whom would the College of Cardinals turn now? Few expected that they would turn to Karol Wojtyła, the 58 year old Archbishop of Kraków. However, after a day's balloting had revealed a deadlock between the two leading Italian candidates, the cardinals made the historic decision to look beyond Italy for a Pope and Wojtyła was quickly chosen.

In his homily, John Paul II challenged the church to regain its evangelical human fervor and its nerve, particularly in defending the fundamental human right of religious freedom throughout the world. He acted as he thought a pastor should act, rather than according to the venerable script written by the traditional managers of popes.

The pope was also attractive to the youth because he defied the cultural conventions of their age and did not pander to them. Rather, he challenged them to moral grandeur. While virtually every other authority figure in the world was lowering the bar of moral expectation, John Paul II held it high. "*You are capable of moral heroism.*"<sup>2</sup> He told young people that they would fail from time to time that is human, but that they should not demean themselves by holding their lives to a lower standard.

All the same, this paper at this point intends to consider the early life of Late Pope John Paul II, consider also the Catholic Church under him with particular reference to his administration, his teachings, his campaign for world peace and his ideology on peace before conclusion follows.

## Early Life

Karol Józef Wojtyła was born in Polish town of Wadowice. He was the youngest of three children born to Karol Wojtyła (1879 - 1941) an ethnic Pole and Emilia Kaczorowska (1884 - 1929). His mother died at childbirth in 1929, his sister Olga had died before his birth and his brother to whom he was very close to also died from scarlet fever.<sup>3</sup> All these affected Wojtyła deeply. As a young boy, Wojtyła was athletic and often played football as goal keeper and was more on the Jewish side because he was surrounded by them. In mid 1938, Wojtyła and his father left Wadowice and moved to Kraków where he undertook his university education. During this time his talent for language blossomed and he learned as many as 12 foreign languages, nine of which he used extensively as Pope.

In 1939, the Nazis had invaded Poland, and its forces closed the university where Karol was studying, leaving him with no choice but to pick up random jobs. From 1940 - 1944, he worked at various places as a messenger for a restaurant, a manual labourer in a limestone quarry and for the solvay chemical factory, all this to avoid deportation to Germany. His father, a former Austro-Hungarian, non-commissioned officer and later officer in the Polish Army died of heart attack in 1941 leaving Wojtyła as the immediate family's only surviving member. At the age of 20, he had already lost all the people he loved. He decided to devote his entire life and time to the priesthood. In October, 1942, he knocked on the door of the Bishop's palace in Krakow and asked to study for the priesthood, and he immediately began courses in the clandestine underground seminary run by the Archbishop of Kraków, Adam Stefan. At this time, following the Nazis' invasion of Poland, there were instances of rebellious uprising against the invaders, and the Nazis were mobilizing young men in Krakow to help contain the uprising. Wojtyła, so as not to get involved went into hiding where he stayed till the Germans left in 1945.<sup>4</sup>

After the Second World War, Wojtyła took up community services which earned him the medal of a Righteous Among the Nations.<sup>5</sup> On finishing his studies at the seminary in Kraków, Wojtyła was ordained a priest on All Saint's day, November 1, 1946 by the Archbishop of Kraków, Cardinal Sapieha.<sup>6</sup>

## Catholic Church Under Pope John Paul II His Administration

In August, 1978, following the death of Pope Paul VI, Cardinal Wojtyla came to Rome where he participated in the conclave, which elected Cardinal Albino Luciani of Venice as Pope. However, John Paul I died after only 33 days as Pope, triggering off another conclave. Wojtyla, was chosen as a comprise candidate and won on the 19th of October, 1978, the third day of the election. He subsequently chose the name John Paul II in honour of his immediate predecessor and also in honour of the late Pope Paul VI. He accepted his election with these words: "With obedience in faith to Christ, my Lord and with trust in the mother of Christ and the church in spite of great difficulties, I accept".<sup>7</sup> He was a strong, passionate and charismatic Priest, Bishop and now he occupied the chair of Saint Peter. He ruled with strength and vitality.

Pope John Paul II was Pope of the Catholic Church from 16 October, 1978 until his death on April 2, 2005. In Catholicism, since his canonization, he is referred to as Saint John Paul the Great.<sup>8</sup> He was the second longest serving pope in modern history after Pope Pius IX, who served for nearly 32 years. John Paul II significantly improved the Catholic Church's relations with Judaism, Islam and Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Anglican Communion. He upheld the church's teachings on such matters as artificial contraception and the ordination of women, but also supported the church's second Vatican council and its reforms.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that history has him as the most travelled world leader, visiting 129 countries during his pontificate. As part of his special emphasis on the universal call for holiness, he beatified 1,340 people and canonized 483 saints, more than the combined tally of his predecessors during the proceeding five centuries. By the time of his death, he had named most of the College of Cardinals, consecrated or co-consecrated a large number of the world's bishops, and ordained many priests. A key goal of his papacy was to transform and reposition the Catholic Church. He wished above all things, to place his church at the heart of a new religious alliance that would bring together Jews, Muslims and Christians in a great religious armada.<sup>10</sup>

He became the first pope to visit the White House in October 1979, where he was greeted warmly by then President Jimmy Carter. He was also

the first reigning Pope to travel to the United Kingdom, in 1982 where he met Queen Elizabeth II, the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. He travelled to Haiti in 1983, Egypt in 2000, Damascus, Syria in 2001.

## His Teachings

As Pope, John Paul II wrote 14 papal encyclicals and taught about sexuality in what is referred to as the 'Theology of the Body'; some key elements of his strategy to reposition the Catholic Church were encyclicals such as *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* and *Redemptoris Mater*. In his "At the beginning of the new millennium" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*), he emphasized the importance of starting afresh with Christ: "No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a person". He wrote several other encyclicals promoting faith and reason as well as the dignity of women.<sup>11</sup>

On his moral stance, he was considered a conservative on doctrine and issues relating to human sexual reproduction and the ordination of women. While visiting the United States of America, he said, "All human life, from the moment of conception and through all subsequent stages, is sacred".<sup>12</sup>

A series of 129 lectures given by John Paul II during his Wednesday audiences in Rome between September, 1979 and November, 1984 were later compiled and published as a single work titled: *Theology of the Body*, an extended meditation on human sexuality. He extended it to the condemnation of abortion, euthanasia and virtually all capital punishment, calling them all a part of The Culture of Death,<sup>13</sup> that is pervasive in the modern world. He campaigned for world debt forgiveness and social justice. He however, stood against homosexual acts and ordination of women to priesthood and chose not to end the discipline of mandatory priestly celibacy.

He stood up for human rights as well as condemning economic injustice, this was seen while he visited ten South African countries advocating for justice and an end to Apartheid in South Africa. He outrightly opposed death penalty, at a papal mass in St. Louis, Missouri, in the United States when he said:

*A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in*

*the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew most recently at christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.<sup>14</sup>*

### **Pope John Paul II's Campaign for World Peace**

Among his advocacies, John Paul II campaigned extensively for world peace, among his teachings and belief he had much passion for justice and peace. In 2003, John Paul II criticized the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq saying in his state of the World Address “*No to war!, war is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity.*”<sup>15</sup> He sent Pio Cardinal Laghi, the former Apostolic Pronuncio to the United States, to talk with George W. Bush, the American President, to express opposition to the war. John Paul II said that it was up to the United Nations to solve the international conflict through diplomacy and that a unilateral aggression is a crime against peace and a violation of international law.

Concerning organized crime, Pope John II was the first Pontiff to actively fight against mafia violence in Southern Italy. In 1993 during a pilgrimage to Agrigento, Sicily, he appealed to the Mafiosi! “I say to those responsible: convert, one day, the judgment of God will arrive. In 1994, John Paul II visited Catania and told victims of mafia violence to “rise up and cloak themselves in light and justice”.<sup>16</sup> However, in 1995, the Mafia bombed two historical churches in Rome. Some believed that this was the mob's vendetta against the Pope for his denunciation of organized crime.

Between 1990 and 1991, a 32-nation coalition led by the United States waged a war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which had annexed Kuwait. Pope John Paul II was a staunch opponent of that Gulf war. Throughout the conflict, he appealed to the international community to stop the war and also led diplomatic initiatives to negotiate peace in the Middle East. In his 1991 Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II vehemently condemned the conflict:

*No, never again war, which destroys the lives of innocent people, teaches how to kill, throws into upheaval even the lives of those who do the killing and leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred, thus making it all the more difficult*

*to find a just solution of the very problems which provoked the war.<sup>17</sup>*

In April 1991, during his *Urbi et Orbi* Sunday message at St. Peter's Basilica, John Paul II called on the international community to lend an ear to the long-ignored aspirations of oppressed people. He specifically named the Kurds, a people who were fighting a civil war against Saddam Hussein's troops in Iraq as one of such people, and referred to the war as a darkness menacing the earth. During this time, the Vatican had expressed its frustration with the international community ignoring the Pope's calls for peace in the Middle East.

Another case of peace-keeping could be seen in the Rwandan genocide. John Paul II was the first world leader to describe as genocide the massacre by Hutus of the Tutsis in the most Catholic country of Rwanda which started in 1990 and reached its height in 1994.<sup>18</sup> He called for a ceasefire and condemned the massacres on 10th April and 15th May 1990. In 1995 during his third visit to Kenya before an audience of 300,000, John Paul II pleaded for an end to the violence in Rwanda and Burundi, pleading for forgiveness and reconciliation as a solution to the genocide. He told Rwandan and Burundian refugees that he was close to them and shared their immense pain. He remarked thus:

*What is happening in your country is a terrible tragedy that must end. During the African Synod, we the Pastors of the church felt the duty to express our consternation and to launch an appeal for forgiveness and reconciliation. This is the only way to dissipate the threats of ethnocentrism that are hovering over Africans these days and that have so brutally touched Rwanda and Burundi.<sup>19</sup>*

### **His Ideology on Peace**

In one of his messages to the world on peace keeping, he reflected on ways to work towards peace. His message went thus; “at the dawn of the new millennium, we wish to propose once more the message of hope which comes from the stable of Bethlehem.” God loves all men and women on earth and gives them the hope of a new era, of peace.<sup>20</sup> His love, fully revealed in the incarnate son, is the foundation of universal peace. When

welcomed in the depths of the human heart, this love reconciles people with God and with themselves, renews human relationships and stirs that desire for brotherhood capable of banishing the temptation of violence and war... To everyone, I affirm that peace is possible. It needs to be implored from God as his gift, but it also needs to be built day by day with his help, through works of justice and love.”<sup>21</sup>

To be sure, the problems which make the path to peace difficult and often discouraging are many and complex, but peace is a need deeply rooted in the heart of every man and woman. The will to seek peace must not therefore be allowed to humanity which has been marred by sin, hatred, and violence, and is called by God to return to peace.<sup>22</sup> This divine plan needs to be recognized and carried out through the search for harmonious relationships between individuals and peoples, in a culture where openness to the transcendent, the promotion of the human person, and respect for the world of nature are shared by all.

In the century we are leaving behind, humanity has been solely tried by an endless and horrifying sequence of wars, conflicts, genocides and “ethnic cleansings” which have caused unspeakable suffering: millions and millions of victims, families and countries destroyed, an ocean of refugees, misery, hunger, diseases, underdevelopment, and the loss of immense resources. At the root of so much suffering, there lies logic of supremacy fueled by the desire to dominate and exploit others, by ideologies of power or totalitarian utopias by crazed nationalism or ancient tribal hatreds.<sup>23</sup>

The twentieth century bequeaths to us above all a warning: wars are often the cause of further wars because they fuel deep hatreds, create situations of injustice, and trample upon people's dignity and rights. Wars generally do not resolve the problems for which they are fought and therefore, in addition to causing horrendous damage, they prove ultimately futile, war is a defeat for humanity. Only in peace will respect for human dignity and its inalienable rights be guaranteed... “Peace on earth to those whom God loves!”

The Gospel greeting prompts a heartfelt question: will the new century be one of peace and a renewed sense of brotherhood between individuals and peoples? We cannot of course foresee the future but we can set forth one certain principle: there will be peace only to the extent that humanity as a whole rediscovers its fundamental calling to be one family in

which the dignity and rights of individuals whatever their status, race or religion are accepted as prior and superior to any kind of difference or distinction.

This recognition can give the world as it is today marked by the process of globalization a soul, a meaning and a direction. Globalization, for all its risks, also offers exceptional and promising opportunities, precisely with a view to enabling humanity to become a singly family, built on the value of justice, equity and solidarity.<sup>24</sup> No one should be deceived into thinking that the simple absence of war, as desirable as it is, is equivalent to lasting peace. There is no true peace without fairness, truth, justice and solidarity. Failure awaits every plan which would separate two indivisible and interdependent born of solidarity injustice, excessive economic or social inequalities, envy, distrust and pride raging among men and nations constantly threaten peace and cause wars.

A way must be found to discuss the problems posed to the future of humanity in a comprehensible and common language. The basis of such a dialogue is the universal moral law written upon the human heart. By following this grammar of the spirit, the human community can confront the problems of coexistence and move forward to the future with respect for God's plan. The encounter between faith and reason, between religion and morality can provide a decisive impulse towards dialogue and cooperation between people's cultures and religions.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

As a spiritual protagonist, Pope John Paul II was indeed an icon of peace. He was a true example of the Bible verse which says; “... the kingdom of God suffers violence and the violent shall take it by force.” Pope John Paul was a “violent” activist of peace and he went extra miles to ensure that the world would become a peaceful cohabitation venue for diverse religious groups.

Pope John Paul II constantly preached for a peaceful world as seen in his reflections towards peace. In his visitations around the world, he continuously made reference to peace and did not hide his hatred towards war, which he rebuked countries especially the United State for engaging in. The life of Pope John Paul II therefore serves as an example to world leaders to constantly work towards maintaining a peaceful society. He

therefore posits that every baptized person must consider himself a minister of reconciliation since having been reconciled with God and the brethren, he is called to build peace with the power for truth and justice.

### Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup>Ibid, P. 24
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid, P. 26
- <sup>4</sup>[http://edition.cnn.com/specials/2005/pope/stories/bio1/index\\_Pope\\_John\\_Paul.html](http://edition.cnn.com/specials/2005/pope/stories/bio1/index_Pope_John_Paul.html)(accessed January 12, 2015).
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- <sup>7</sup>Edward Stourton, *John Paul II: Man of History*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2006. P. 63
- <sup>8</sup>Slawomir Oder, *Why He is a Saint: The life and faith of Pope John Paul II*, London : Rizzoli International publications, 2012. Pp. 107–108
- <sup>9</sup>Stourton *John Paul II: Man of History*, p.171.
- <sup>10</sup>George Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, New York: Harper Collins, 2001. p.71
- <sup>11</sup>John Paul II writings, ewtn.com. [http://www.ewtn.com/John\\_Paul\\_II\\_writings.html](http://www.ewtn.com/John_Paul_II_writings.html).(accessed January 12, 2015).
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- <sup>13</sup>Ibid, p.56
- <sup>14</sup>“Pope John Paul II’s statement on the death penalty”, Vatican News, [http://www.vatican.com/news/news/pope\\_john\\_paul\\_ii's\\_statement\\_on\\_the\\_death\\_penalty.html](http://www.vatican.com/news/news/pope_john_paul_ii's_statement_on_the_death_penalty.html). Accessed January 11, 2015.
- <sup>15</sup>“Address to the diplomatic corps”, Vatican News, [http://www.vatican.com/news/john\\_paul\\_ii\\_talk\\_on\\_war.html](http://www.vatican.com/news/john_paul_ii_talk_on_war.html). accessed January 11, 2015.
- <sup>16</sup>“The Priest who stood up to the mafia”, Vatican news, [http://www.vatican.com/new/pope\\_john\\_ii\\_visit\\_to\\_Agrigento.htm](http://www.vatican.com/new/pope_john_ii_visit_to_Agrigento.htm)(accessed January 11, 2015).

- <sup>17</sup>“Pontiff’s message condemns Destruction of Gulf war”, Vatican news, [http://www.vatican.com/news/pontiff's\\_message\\_condemns\\_destruction\\_of\\_gulf\\_war.html](http://www.vatican.com/news/pontiff's_message_condemns_destruction_of_gulf_war.html).(accessed January 15, 2015).
- <sup>18</sup>Alfred A. Knapp: *Crossing the threshold of Hope: Pope John Paul II* (Alfred A. Knapp, Inc, 1994) p.149.
- <sup>19</sup>Donatella Lorch, *Pope calls for end to killings in Rwanda* (Penguin Books, 1995), p.4.
- <sup>20</sup>Knapp: *Crossing the threshold of Hope, Pope John Paul II*, p. 151.
- <sup>21</sup>Dr. Michael Waldstein, *The Way of Christ: spiritual exercises* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1994), pp.1-3.
- <sup>22</sup>Thomas Michael (ed), “*Fethulah Gülen and Pope John Paul II: Two Kronrunners for peace*”\_ In *Dialogue Asia-pacific*, issue 14. (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2007), pp.6-8.
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- <sup>24</sup>Ibid, p.229
- <sup>25</sup>Jonathan Kwitng, *The Man of the century: The Life and Time of Pope John Paul II* (Henry Holt and Company, 2007), p.592.