

The Wichita Eagle

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TWENTY YEARS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

'The will is still there'

■ John Paul II is the longest-serving pope of the 20th century. Despite perceptible health problems, he's not done yet.

By **Charles W. Holmes**
New York Times News Service

VATICAN CITY — History occasionally hands the world a leader who so seamlessly fits the job and his times that it is difficult to imagine anyone else in the role.

Today, Pope John Paul II marks 20 years at the head of the billion-strong Roman Catholic Church, a job he has redefined with tenacious energy and unprecedented globe-trotting during two momentous decades.

Now at 78, he is fragile and fading. Yet he continues to enliven his church while staunchly defending its traditional doctrine.

"The step is slower," said Archbishop John Foley, a Vatican spokesman, "but the will is still there."

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Warm, caring is how Kansans see the pontiff

By **Erin Kennedy**
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Catholics in the Wichita Diocese have described him as a spiritual anchor, a multilingual wonder, a true shepherd and just what the church needed after the shake-ups of Vatican II.

But what those who've been close to Pope John Paul II remember most is how personable, warm and human he is — and how special he made them feel.

The pontiff is celebrating his 20th year today as head of the Catholic Church. He is known for his groundbreaking letters on moral theology and his revisions of canon law. He has canonized or beatified more than 1,000 people and has been active in working for peace worldwide.

"There is something that is larger than him," said Bishop Eugene Gerber, head of the Wichita Diocese, who has had private meetings with the pope and attended lunches with him and several bishops.

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A historic papacy

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Oct. 16, 1978 Jan. 10, 1984 July 15, 1992 April 29, 1994 Oct. 5, 1995 Oct. 8, 1996 March 16, 1998

On the move:
The 78-year-old pope has made a record 84 trips abroad.



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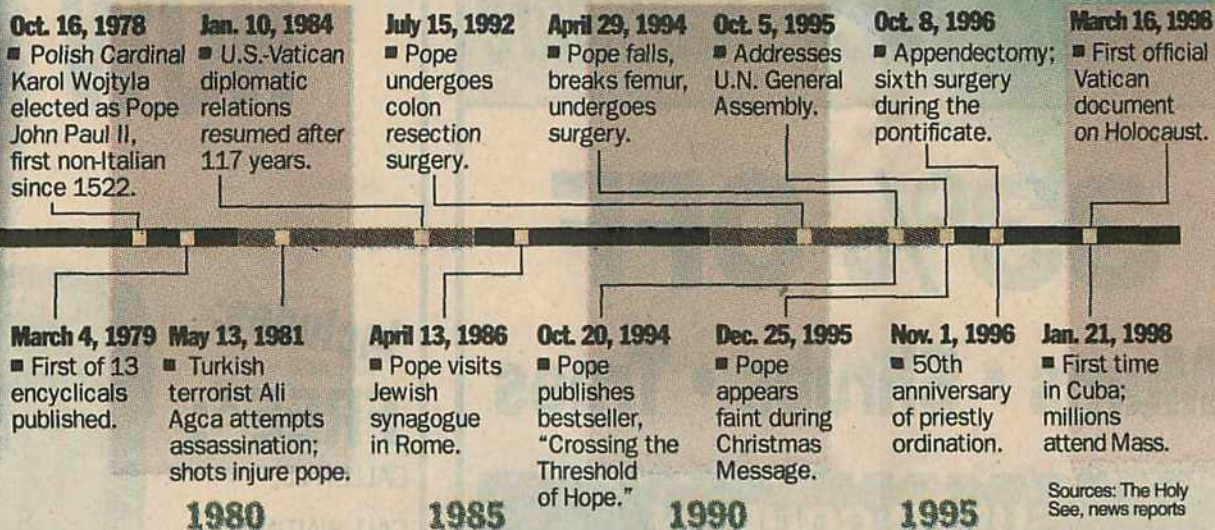
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Sources: The Holy See, news reports
Knight Ridder Tribune

POPE

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taken steps to reconcile Christianity and Judaism, issuing a formal apology recently for the Catholic church's silence during the Holocaust.

Beginning a third decade at the Vatican, his reign is longer than any other pope this century. His mind remains strong, even if he must fight his ailing body. In 1999, he plans trips to Mexico, St. Louis and to his native Poland.

As pope, John Paul II has traveled 670,878 miles to 117 countries to deliver his message to many millions in person, billions on television — making him among the most recognizable figures on the planet.

He has been called by a recent biographer "the last of the giants on the global stage."

Ceremonies at the Vatican and in Poland will observe the papal anniversary today. On Sunday, a special high Mass will be celebrated in St. Peter's Square.

John Paul II, despite his sometimes visible pain and slurred speech (reportedly the result of Parkinson's disease, though the Vatican has never confirmed it), is looking beyond today's milestone to the approaching millennium.

He pledges to be present for the Holy Year 2000 Jubilee, being planned as a celebration of the church's history and a reaffirmation of its dogma.

On Thursday, he released his 13th papal encyclical, a 154-page intellectual and theological letter to the faithful reminding them not to lose their way "in the shifting sands of widespread skepticism."

In the encyclical, titled "Faith and Reason," the Roman Catholic leader called for a marriage of faith and rational thought in the search for truth about the human condition.

The encyclical underscores a theme running through all the pope's teaching — that humankind can, and must, agree on certain universal truths. It laments the rise of nihilism, historicism, agnosticism, relativism and other beliefs "that tend to devalue even the truths that had been judged certain."

Inevitably, the pope's health has led to speculation inside the Vatican and out about his possible successor and the future course of Catholic theology.

Likewise, theologians and historians have begun the debate over his legacy. The greatest pope this century? The greatest pope since St. Peter and St. Paul?

"He'll be a tough act to follow," said Monsignor Timothy Dolan, rector of the Pontifical North American College of Rome, a seminary near the Vatican.

"It would be difficult to think of the papacy as returning to the former model of leadership — just the CEO of the church. It is that, of course, but he has shifted it to a new paradigm — to a dimension as a world leader, a towering moral figure and a universal pastor. He will be the model for future popes," Dolan said.

Despite the enigmatic internal politics of the Vatican, the numbers suggest that the pope's legacy will continue after his death. All but 14 of the 115 cardinals eligible to elect a new pontiff were appointed by John Paul II. More than half of the church's 4,200 bishops advanced during this pope's reign.

Consider also the influence on a generation of young Roman Catholics.

Dolan points out that the new priests being graduated from his seminary and others grew up with no other role model. "They think it normal for the pope to travel, to be accessible, to speak with people and not at people," he said.

In October 1978, the Berlin Wall was still up. Star Wars was just a movie, not a defense strategy. The Internet was sheer fantasy and few homes had a computer. Iran was still America's friend.

Karol Wojtyla, the multilingual, 58-year-old archbishop of Krakow, Poland, was the first non-Italian pope in 455 years and the first Polish pope ever, elected as change was beginning to sweep throughout his homeland and the rest of Communist-ruled Eastern Europe.

Living through the ravages of Nazi and Soviet-era rule in Poland, he put his personal stamp on the Solidarity movement in Poland and threw the full moral weight of the church behind the relatively bloodless revolution throughout Eastern Europe. He traveled to Nicaragua in 1983 and stared down the Marxist Sandinistas over their human rights abuses.

In traveling the world, he brought a common touch and a finesse of the cameras as no other 20th century pope before him. He survived an assassination attempt in 1981, but continued his frequent travel.

In the age of television and the World Wide Web, he humanized what for centuries had seemed an unapproachable, authoritarian job.

"He is charming. He is intellectual. He has a sense of humor. If he weren't genuine, it wouldn't work. The world is full of examples of leaders who have tried and failed to use the media to their advantage," said Frederigo Argentieri, a political science professor at John Cabot University in Rome.

Yet for all his modernity, he has remained a staunch traditionalist defending church doctrine and resisting change — opposing birth control, abortion, a role for women in the priesthood, suggestions that priests should be permitted to marry.

Vatican aides say he still wishes to go three places that politics and diplomacy have denied him: Russia, China and the Holy Land.

Contributing: Los Angeles Times/Washington Post Service