

# Pope of hope

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*By Okey Ndibe*

AFTER a remarkable reign of twenty-six years, Pope John Paul 11 died last Saturday bringing to a close a profoundly historic pontificate. In sheer momentousness, the manner of his death was a fitting finale to the awe-inspiring majesty of his life and the extraordinary accomplishments of his pastoral and social work

Born on May 18, 1920 in Wadowice, Poland, the pope grew up with the name Karol Wojtyla. The courage that would be a significant signature of his papacy had its provenance in his experience as a citizen of a country occupied by rapacious foreign powers. Not only was the pope's Polish homeland occupied and defiled by Nazi Germany, it also fell under Moscow's suzerainty. The pope's seminary training had to be carried out as a surreptitious act of defiance. Had his priestly ambition being discovered, he might have faced harsh imprisonment, banishment to a labour camp, or death.

The late pope was certainly cut out for great historical deeds within the church as well as the wider world. When he was elected pope in 1978, he came, as it were, from behind. He was something of a dark horse, hardly reckoned by the odds makers as one of the presumptive contenders. In the event, his election created quite a stir and a few records. He

became, for one, the first ever Slavic pope. Perhaps a more impressive fact was that he became the first non-Italian pope in more than four hundred years. Given the fact that he was not from within the vast Vatican bureaucratic juggernaut, many pundits held him to middling, if not utterly low, expectations.

From the outset, however, Pope John Paul 11 served notice that he would not be a push-over, either as a religious leader or a player on the stage of world events. The very first words of his papal reign were: "Be not afraid." The imploration was both poignant and particularly potent for the time, a time marked by profound anxiety, unease and foreboding. In the midst of uncertainty, the pope's defining motto was a calculated balm.

A man of stupendous intellectual accomplishment, the pope was an amazing polyglot, fluent in nine languages. A philosopher of substantial credentials, he wrote widely and persuasively on metaphysics and other important questions, exploring and critiquing with an assured touch a diversity of philosophical outlooks. In a world that affects visceral disdain for the religious perspective, he insisted that faith and reason need not be at war, but

could just as plausibly and powerfully be integrated and reconciled.

For sure, part of the pope's appeal lay in the depth of his intellectual gifts. But there was more, a quality about his person at once impossible to define and yet remarked upon by many who met him. It was a different kind of synthesis. The pope embodied a devotion to sanctity that was infectious and awe-inspiring. But his was a brand of holiness that, far from being joyless, evoked the deepest welling up of charisma. He brought a quiet yet powerful quality of charm to the ascetic and meditative rituals of prayerfulness. This dimensionality and multitudinousness to the pope's character found expression, for example, in his writings. In addition to scholarly books, he also wrote poetry and plays. As a cardinal in Krakow, he combined contemplative prayers with long sessions of skiing, showing off a gracefulness as he bobbed and wove down snow-covered slopes. We had in this late pope, then, a quintessential priest who nevertheless exuded life in its exuberant fullness. By all accounts, he was a remarkable raconteur and also had a splendid sense of humour.

Of the many stories told in the last few days about the late pope's wittiness, my favourite is about Karol Wojtyla's encounter with a man who wanted to know why a cardinal would engage in a sport like skiing. The future pope answered that there would be a problem only if he, as a cardinal, was poor at skiing. Then he told the man that fifty percent of Polish cardinals skied. The joke

was that there were then only two cardinals in Poland.

Like many cradle Catholics, I was moved by the late pope's unwavering espousal of his faith, and also by his faithfulness as shepherd of his flock. While he was never able to mobilise all Catholics behind his orthodox apprehensions of the place of the church in a vastly transformed world, many within the church and outside admired the eloquence and vigour with which he led. Disregarded by many adult Catholics in Europe and North America, the pope's message found paradoxical resonance with millions of young people hungry for spiritual answers in a world of futile materialism. His World Youth events drew fervent young faithfuls from all over the world. A man who lost his mother before he turned ten, and his father soon after, the pope was able to speak to the youth's sense of alienation and emptiness.

As deeply committed as he was to the salvific mission of his church, the late pope was possessed of an impressive ecumenical spirit as well as a profound desire to heal the wounds wrought on the human race by rabid sectarianism. His pontificate saw a dramatic mending of fences between Christians and Jews. He became not only the first pope to step foot in a synagogue but went on to address a rabbi as "my elder brother." Growing up in a Poland overrun by Nazi forces, he saw first hand the horrors visited upon the Jewish people. He lost many of his Jewish friends to the concentration camps. This early vision of the ravages of racist ideology shaped the pope's profound humanism and enabled

him to develop a deep antipathy to all forms of oppression.

In the wake of his death, many commentators have focused on the pope's role in shaping world events. In particular, he has been celebrated in the U.S. and Europe as the central catalyst in the eventual collapse of communism. There is no question that the man many are proposing, with good reason, for elevation into the rare ranks of great popes, was responsible for some of the overt and covert strategies that propelled communism's implosion. Besides, he made himself a dependable and insistent voice on behalf of repressed populations everywhere, including in Nigeria. Visiting Nigeria during the dictatorship of Sani Abacha, the pope spoke boldly and bluntly on behalf of detained dissidents. In public and private fora, he invited Abacha to respect political freedoms, and to refrain from violating the pluralistic spirit of the Nigerian nation. When President George W. Bush invaded Iraq in an unprovoked, unjustifiable war, the pope spoke clearly as a voice of principled opposition to misconceived American adventurism.

If the pope began his pontificate at a tumultuous time by inviting the faithful to eschew fear, he ended it moments before he breathed his last by muttering "Amen," the central affirmative word in Christendom. Those two statements provide a frame for the way Pope John Paul II envisioned and executed his mandate as leader of the largest Christian group. Historians and theologians will have the task of considering, not whether he left deep marks on the church and

history (for that question is settled), but where he ranks in the pantheon of the great movers of world and ecclesiastical events.

In a world obsessed with material accumulation, with expedient posturing, the late pope challenged us to turn our eyes to matters pertaining to man's inmost spiritual needs. He urged us to ponder ineffable questions, to have the courage to confront forces that, at first glance, may seem invincible. He also asked us to bear our cross, when we must, with dignity. He not only challenged, he lived his precepts. For most of his papacy, the flow of world events threatened to engender festering despair. Eschewing this compulsion, the pope held up hope for humanity. His inspiration and influence, his legacy, will be lasting.

## Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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### About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

#### Speaking Engagements

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