

Saying Goodbye to the Pope

It's too bad that the cable TV news coverage of the Pope's death has desensitized some Americans. The wall-to-wall commentary quickly became tiresome to many and millions tuned out. That's a shame because Pope John Paul's life is very much worth examining.

Here is a man who was undeniably saintly, a person who lived on this earth but operated in a spiritual zone few of us could ever contemplate. He considered worldly matters only in the context of what God "expected." Practical problem solving was not the Pope's priority. He was truly a faith-based man.

In the summer of 2003, I traveled to Rome to find out why the Pope had been so publicly detached from the American priest scandal. As a loyal Catholic, I was angry that the Pontiff had not been more proactive in punishing people like Cardinal Law who obviously had stonewalled the sexual abuse of minors by some clergy members. My public criticism of the Pope led the Catholic League to bitterly criticize me, so I wanted to be absolutely sure that my opinion of the Pope's conduct in that terrible matter was based on facts.

While in Rome, I learned a lot about the Pope from people who worked with him daily. They were fearful of speaking on the record because the Pope's advisors did not brook dissent. Any open criticism of John Paul was not tolerated by the Holy See.

Off the record, I found out that the Pope was deeply hurt by the sexual abuse situation, but was convinced by his advisors that it was an "American" problem. Thus, when he visited Canada in 2002, he declined a meeting with some sexual abuse victims. Apparently, the Pope's advisors felt the meeting would be too stressful for the ailing Pontiff.

For the last few years of his life, Pope John Paul was almost totally disengaged from temporal matters. Ravaged by disease,

he prayed and meditated most of the time, leaving the day to day running of the Vatican to others. Those "others" were mostly conservative European clergymen who tended to view the USA as a self-absorbed, materialistic country out of touch with much of the world.

So, when the War on Terror erupted, the Vatican was sympathetic to America but tentative in condemning Islamic extremists. The Church did not want to exacerbate Catholic-Muslim tensions and avoided specific policy recommendations.

Then came the war in Iraq, which put the Holy See directly at odds with the Bush administration. Once again, the Pope did not really get directly involved, but this time, his Secretary of State, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, denounced the attack on Saddam, pointedly saying that the war was not a necessity.

Up until the end of his life, the Pope remained consistent in his belief that prayer would overcome evil. He saw the Nazis destroyed and the Soviet Union fall. He believed good would triumph over evil if good people prayed and stayed loyal to values of freedom, life and belief in God.

For some of us, that spiritual stance in the face of terror and sexual abuse was hard to take. Americans are a people of action, a problem solving bunch. We want results now—not on God's time.

But perhaps Pope John Paul was wise in his determination to put faith ahead of activism. I still believe the next Pope should be more of this earth, but I cannot fault the philosophy of John Paul; that all life is sacred and human beings have a God given right to live in freedom. The Pope prayed for that constantly. So should we all.