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The Pope and God
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Pope John Paul II believed in God. He believed God was involved in our world and that He acted to further His goals for humanity.

This simple observation has been overlooked by most of the tributes to the Pope's life and the reviews of his impact. These articles have emphasized his role in the collapse of communism in Europe, his rapprochement with Judaism, the "conservative" direction in which he led the Church, his emphasis on the "culture of life" with his strong opposition to abortion -- among many other actions. But these media essays have seen these actions as political, as worldly, as social, rather than as the deeds of a leader who saw God's participation in human life.

John Paul aimed to discover God's activity among humans and to link Christians to God. He did so not in the Protestant terms which American popular culture bandies about so readily; the Pope did not speak about being "born again," or about "having a relationship with Jesus."

Instead, John Paul saw God's activity in specifically Catholic terms. For example, he sought to identify God's presence in and support of holy people. In a world that has been widely secularized, he looked for saints, for people whose innocence and pure devotion to God enabled them to have a special link to Him. And John Paul found them, 464 of them to be exact.

Through his recognition of this enormous number of saints, the Pope reminded Catholics that God is still present in the world and working for His people.

The Pope also strongly emphasized liturgy, the Mass in particular. This was not merely a formulaic love of ritual, but affirmed that God was present in the Eucharist (Holy Communion). By partaking in this sacrament, according to Church belief, ordinary Catholics meet God himself and participate in his saving sacrifice. John Paul himself regularly participated in Mass, seeking strength from the divine contact inherent in that ritual. For John Paul, God was not reserved for a few saintly individuals, but for all Christians.

A further link to God available to all Catholics is prayer, and John Paul emphasized this as well. He had an active prayer life, not just in publicly presiding over Church rituals, but also in his private life, as has been often reported. Indeed, he called it his "first duty." In prayer, he not only sought out God for himself, but he also provided an example of an approach to God that could be practiced by all of his flock.

The Pope's belief that God was active in the world, and especially in the Catholic Church, dictated his thinking and decisions about many of the issues which he had to address. In his first sermon as Pope, he said that he believed his election was God's will, and that it was part of God's plan against communism.

It also informed his approach to what he termed the "culture of life."

The scientific and medical information about conception was irrelevant to his consideration of the question. The matter was simple: God ordained life from the moment of conception. What other possibility could there be? Would God wait around for a couple of weeks and then get involved? Nonsense, John Paul believed. It was not simply a "conservative" position for the Pope; he believed it stemmed from God's interaction with human life.

In the end, John Paul's belief in God's actions also informed his approach to death. In the last week, John Paul decided that God had decreed the end. The Pope himself decided not to return to the hospital to undergo extraordinary measures to sustain his life. God was calling, he would go.

Any retrospective of John Paul must be founded on his deep belief in God's presence, love, and actions in this world. Without that recognition, the retrospective can only be list of activities that lacks an understanding of their meaning