

1978– A YEAR OF CHANGE: THE YEAR OF THREE POPES

High school sophomores typically pay scant attention to matters related to the universal Church. But 1978 was no ordinary year. It was dubbed “The Year of Three Popes,” and this incoming sophomore remembered it well. Throughout my entire life until 1975, I had only heard the name “Paul” invoked at Mass, followed by “Leo, our Bishop” in reference to Archbishop Leo Binz. That all changed in August of 1978 when the man who had been elected pope two months before I was born was called home to God. While I was still too young to fully comprehend all that was transpiring, the final years of Pope Paul VI’s pontificate were not easy ones, as attitudes hardened following the rejection of his **courageous and prophetic encyclical** *Humanae Vitae* by noted theologians. On the day before my 15th birthday another Italian was elected, who took the name **John Paul I**. The only impression it made upon me was that he took the names of the two previous popes in succession, I surmised as a way to honor both. But I was truly shocked when he died just 33 days after his election. The world never got to know him, but he is recalled with great fondness as a gentle shepherd of souls.

Pope John Paul I (Albino Luciani) was the first pontiff to be born in the 20th century, hailing from northern Italy. But would you believe that **ten popes in history** have actually had **shorter reigns** than did he—what was in the Vatican drinking water? He was affectionately known as “Il Papa del Sorriso” (the smiling pope), for his ever-present joy. He delivered only four Wednesday General Audiences from St. Peter’s Square, prayed the Sunday Angelus from his apartment window just five times and preached a total of two homilies at papal Masses. By the mid-1970s, there was so much change in society, and the Church needed to confront this reality with resolve, while remaining firm in faith and hope. Following the Second Vatican Council, heightened expectations for rapid change in the Church were found in some quarters, coinciding with pervasive societal changes. Compare any high school yearbook from 1968 to one from the mid-70’s— the change it is quite dramatic. Much more than fashion changed. The Church was facing intense pressure to adapt quickly to the culture.

This attitude became particularly challenging for the Church. It is hard to imagine any ecumenical council living up to the expectations that some had imposed upon it. In God’s Providence, into this milieu entered **Pope John Paul II**. Elected at just age 58 on October 16, 1978 and **installed on October 22, 1978**, he preached an unforgettable inaugural homily that included the lines, “Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ.” My recollections of his election are foggy, but without question it was his national heritage that stood out. Fr. John Pilaczynski was a longtime religion teacher at my high school. Being himself of Polish descent, I recall he was giddy with joy! “By golly, we have a Polish pope!” I never occurred to me that a non-Italian would be elected to the Chair of St. Peter. That literally shocked the world, and I imagine it was quite an adjustment for many, especially in the Roman Curia!

And yet, almost immediately, he began to exercise his ministry in a manner that demonstrated his **global Catholic vision**. In October 1979, I paid close attention as he traveled to Iowa during his first visit to the United States. I regret that I did not attend that Mass at a farm outside of Des Moines, but the fact that he visited a tiny country parish prior to the outdoor Mass made a deep impression upon me. It showed me that he cared very much about everyone, and intended for his ministry to reach to the edges. Nor can I forget the image when he **publicly scolded** Fr. Ernesto Cardenal who had taken up a position with the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. He made it very clear in that 1983 encounter in which he shook his finger that the priest is called to spiritual service, and never to be active agents in the secular government.

It was clearly time to begin to reign in some of the excesses following Vatican II, and Pope John Paul II labored tirelessly to that end. But he did so while combining concern for the poor and needy with his desire to “go out into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel” (Mark 16:15). This resulted in an unprecedented Apostolic Visit schedule that included 104 foreign trips to **129 countries** during the course of his pontificate. Perhaps the day and age of social media has lessened the necessity for popes to travel as much. In truth, these trips are logistically difficult and extremely costly to the host nation. Similarly, it has become more common for pilgrims to travel to Rome than it was even 40 years ago, providing other means for people to encounter the Holy Father.

Pope John Paul II became more visible and influential on the world stage (e.g. Poland's Solidarity movement) while internally discerning a need for more clarity in doctrine amidst intense liturgical and doctrinal experimentation. Statistics unequivocally demonstrate that the largest number of reported incidents of sexual abuse by clergy occurred in 1980. The devastating effects of the sexual revolution of the 1960's were in full force. In 1981, John Paul II appointed Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the two worked side by side until the pontiff's death in 2005. Having survived the assassination attempt of May 1981, it was clear that Pope John Paul II was moving ahead with firm resolve to shepherd the Church towards the dawn of a new millennium.

- This week brings a great opportunity to learn about the life of Servant of God **Augustus Tolton** (1854-1897), former slave who became a Catholic priest, serving in Illinois in the late 19th century. A special one-man play is showing at the Basilica of St. Mary (Oct. 23) and again at the Helene Houle Auditorium at Saint Agnes School (Oct. 25) Showtime for the 75-minute play is at 7:00 p.m. at both venues.
- A powerful new independent film is attracting both viewers and attention. "Gosnell: The Trial of America's Biggest Serial Killer" is the story of the trial of Dr. Kermit Gosnell, the most notorious abortionist in U.S. history. To be a juror on that trial, you needed to be pro-choice. None was pro-choice after the verdict. See.This.Film. Consult gosnellmovie.com for locations near you.
- Did you catch that at last Sunday's Canonization Mass, Pope Francis used Pope Paul VI's chalice and wore Archbishop Romero's cincture (the rope-like belt worn around the waist)? Among the seven souls raised to the dignity of the altar was Nunzio Sulprizio (†1836), a 19-year-old Neapolitan apprentice blacksmith, who suffered poor health his entire life, bearing his crosses with heroic charity and joy.
- Having a bad day? A St. Cloud Cathedral H.S. football player could not contain his frustration as he saw his team losing again. So, **from the sidelines**, he sprinted onto the field to tackle an opposing player to prevent another long touchdown. Talk about the 12th man advantage— he was flagged for a penalty. But I credit him with offering a sincere apology on Twitter the next day.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector