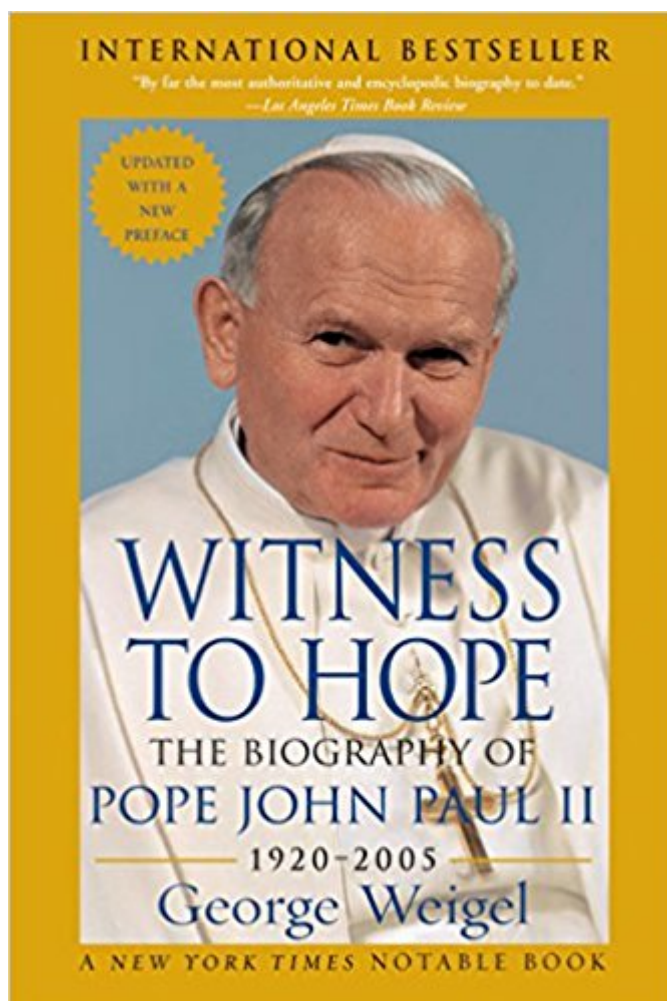


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Witness To Hope: The Biography Of Pope John Paul II



Synopsis

The Definitive Biography of Pope John Paul II *Witness to Hope* is the authoritative biography of one of the singular figures -- some might argue the singular figure -- of our time. With unprecedented cooperation from John Paul II and the people who knew and worked with him throughout his life, George Weigel offers a groundbreaking portrait of the Pope as a man, a thinker, and a leader whose religious convictions defined a new approach to world politics -- and changed the course of history. As even his critics concede, John Paul II occupied a unique place on the world stage and put down intellectual markers that no one could ignore or avoid as humanity entered a new millennium fraught with possibility and danger. The Pope was a man of prodigious energy who played a crucial yet insufficiently explored role in some of the most momentous events of our time, including the collapse of European communism, the quest for peace in the Middle East, and the democratic transformation of Latin America. This updated edition of *Witness to Hope* explains how this "man from a far country" did all of that, and much more -- and what both his accomplishments and the unfinished business of his pontificate mean for the future of the Church and the world.

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Customer Reviews

Witness To Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II by George Weigel is as comprehensive a biography of its subject as can be hoped for while the Pope still lives. Weigel, a journalist who came to the Pope's attention after the publication of his book, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism*, wrote *Witness To Hope* with his subject's encouragement

and assistance. Weigel had unprecedented access to the Pope's correspondence (with, among others, world leaders including Mikhail Gorbachev). He reports lengthy conversations with many members of the Pope's inner circle, and he occasionally reveals vivid details of the Pope's daily life (for example, at the beginning of each day, the Pope's adviser's hear moans and groaning from John Paul's solitary prayers in his private chapel). According to Weigel, the Pope told him that other biographies "try to understand me from outside. But I can only be understood from inside." Unfortunately, Weigel's method for understanding the Pope "from inside" depends on psychological conjecture ("It may help to begin by thinking of Karol Wojtyla as a man who grew up very fast") and is weakened by his extreme eagerness to praise his subject ("the man with arguably the most coherent and comprehensive vision of the human possibility in the world ahead"). More troubling, Weigel does not ask some of the really difficult questions about this Pope--regarding his involvement with sects such as Opus Dei, for example, or the relationship between his innovative "theology of the body" and his conservative stance on homosexuality, or even the vicissitudes of prayer life. *Witness To Hope* is a valuable book because it reports many facts that others have not reported. But for incisive analysis of this Pope's theological and political significance, or for insight into his spiritual life, readers will have to wait until the principals in his life story are free to speak more frankly with some future biographer. --Michael Joseph Gross --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Weigel's massive work aspires to be definitive: it is subtitled "the," not "a," biography of John Paul II. Weigel, a Catholic layman and a fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., enjoyed the cooperation of the pope and access to top Vatican officials, so the book is rich in new detail. Determined to explain this papacy from the "inside out," Weigel successfully focuses on John Paul's trademark ideas: Christian humanism, the inner connection between freedom and truth, and culture as the driving force of history. As a guide to the pope's thought, *Witness to Hope* is invaluable. Yet as biography, it is often defective. Weigel frequently dismisses John Paul's critics rather than debating their ideas. The author's strong pro-Americanism leads him to misrepresent the pope as opposing a "third way" between capitalism and socialism and to treat his criticism of the Gulf War as a rare misjudgment. Though John Paul is a towering 20th-century figure, the assertion that his papacy is the most important since the Counter Reformation seems overblown. The book is well written (if somewhat repetitive, perhaps inevitably so with more than 900 pages) and Weigel's command of the material is impressive, but *Witness to Hope* reads more like a valedictory hagiography than a sober work of journalism. (Oct.) Copyright

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Author George Weigel is a theologian and author of books such as *The Truth of Catholicism: Ten Controversies Explored*, *The Courage To Be Catholic: Crisis, Reform And The Future Of The Church*, etc. He notes in the Prologue to this 1999 book, "He [the Pope] is an accomplished philosopher, recognized as such by peers throughout the world, but he never took a serious course in the subject. He is a mystic who was a vigorous sportsman for almost seventy years. He is a celibate with a remarkable insight into human sexuality... He is a Pole with a marked sensitivity toward ... Judaism." (Pg. 13) Weigel notes that Karol Wojtyla was a seminarian in Nazi-occupied Poland, and "The archbishop then decided to take the seminary fully underground. Candidates would be accepted secretly. They would continue their work, telling no one of their new position. They would study in their free time... And in due course, it was hoped, they would complete their studies and be ordained, having managed to avoid the Gestapo in the interim. Karol Wojtyla was among the first ten seminarians chosen for this extraordinary process..." (Pg. 70) At age 38, he "found himself the youngest bishop in Poland." (Pg. 147) He "was created a cardinal in 1967 by Pope Paul VI, at the exceptionally young age of forty-seven, [and] was the first bishop of Krakow in the thousand-year history of the see who was not born to the gentry class." (Pg. 187) After he was elected Pope, "This new Bishop of Rome would not be crowned with the *triregnum*, the papal tiara. Rightly or wrongly, John Paul noted, the tiara had come to be considered a symbol of the Pope's temporal power." (Pg. 262) He observes that "On December 27, 1983, John Paul II gave a personal witness to the imperative of reconciliation by celebrating Mass at Rebibbia prison and visiting his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, in his cell... John Paul patiently explained [to Agca] that Mary, whom many Muslims venerated, was the Mother of God, that she loved all people, and that Agca shouldn't be afraid." (Pg. 474) Although there was early hope for talks with Anglicans, "The hope for visible unity between Anglicans and Roman Catholics would continue to fade---despite the ongoing theological dialogue, warm welcomes to Rome for the archbishops of Canterbury and other visiting Anglican leaders, and impressive joint efforts to heal the historical memories caused by the martyrdoms of the Reformation era... institutional ecclesial reunion seemed very far away indeed." (Pg. 522) Similarly, "During the mid-1990s, there was widespread expectation that years of ecumenical dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics would result in a joint declaration on 'justification by faith,' the core issue of the Lutheran Reformation." But on the same day that a Joint Declaration was released in 1998, the Vatican issued a "Response," which "suggested that further

clarification on the doctrine of justification and its relationship to other basic truths of the Christian faith was required... Lutherans were not happy with what seemed, at least through media reports, to be Catholic reneging." (Pg. 826-827) Ultimately, Weigel concludes, "John Paul's major investment in ecumenism has yielded rather modest concrete accomplishments." (Pg. 858) He notes in conclusion, "These numbers and institutional facts tell a story of remarkable personal energy. Inside the numbers, it can be argued, is an even more impressive story of accomplishment that will shape the life of the Catholic Church... well into the third millennium of Christian history." (Pg. 845) This is an exceptional biography, and will provide great insight into one of the key figures of the 20th century.

At over 1000 pages, this might be considered to be a massive book. But, the story being told is massive and its subject is intense and deep and large in wisdom and self-discipline and faith and hope and love. More could have been said. The description of the person and events is actually sparse in comparison to what it might have been. Such a story and journey of a life it is! What a leader! Such clarity of philosophical thought! Such self-giving! Such prayer and vision and courage! Well-researched. Well-organized. Insightful analysis and commentary. Well stated and written. It is a large book but it provides a large education. Topics addressed include culture, philosophy, ethics, policy, strategy, tactics, history, prayer and theology.

John Paul II was a transformational character of the 20th C. Even though I'm not of a like mind in many areas of religion and Catholicism, I admire people who follow their hearts to the extent this pope did. Weigel is definitely an admirer of this pope as well. Nicely written.

I did not expect to find Weigel on the Pope so engrossing. I decided to buy it because I have come to realize just how significant a figure in both Christian and world affairs the Pope has been. Karol Wojtyla's biography has inspired me to look beyond the present. As I read I realized how deeply I had misunderstood the Pope. There is little doubt that he is one of the greatest figures of our time. Some of my misconceptions of John Paul were due to my own personal discomfort as an Anglican with various facets of Roman Catholicism. However, our own limited perceptions should not distort our recognition of greatness. Just as I brought my own preconceptions to the man, so have the media who have been covering him since that day in 1978 when he was elected. The press have distorted this man because they have read him through glasses tinted by their own secular conditioning. As a result there is a "good" John Paul who affirms some of their social agendas, and

then there is the "bad" John Paul, who seems not to understand their progressive preferences. Weigel makes it clear that they have profoundly misunderstood him because will not measure him on his own Christian terms. To grasp the significance of John Paul, we need to come to terms with the complexities of his personality and his origins in a family beset by tragedy in his early years. But that is not enough. From there we need to explore his own personal Christian journey, his theological formation, his philosophical studies, and the tough environment in which he grew to adulthood and exercised the first 30 years of his ministry. Furthermore, this man who cannot be understood unless we see him first and foremost as a priest, a pastor, and a man of mystical prayer. "The sheer drama of Karol Wojtyla's life would defy the imagination of the most fanciful screenwriter," says Weigel. The Poland in which Wojtyla grew up briefly emerged from Nazi tyranny, only to be swept into the Russian sphere of influence and be subjected to a different kind of totalitarian repression as a result of the unfortunate dealings at Yalta. In the brief twilight between these two oppressions, he was ordained and sent to Rome to study. If we are to understand the Pope's perception of world affairs, we have to realize the significant part Yalta plays in his grasp of global realities. An actor, playwright, priest, philosopher, pastor, and athlete, John Paul II seems almost too good to be true. "Given the expectations of contemporary biography, a writer almost regrets the absence of detractors and critics of his subject. Perhaps even more striking is the fact that Karol Wojtyla's intelligence, creativity, and pastoral success did not attract clerical jealousies... He lived a singularly integrated priestly and personal life." The opening 250 pages focus on Wojtyla's life prior to the papacy. The remainder deals life since. In the years before his election, Wojtyla had become a major player in world Catholicism, having been appointed Archbishop of Krakow and then a cardinal at an exceedingly early age. Only after he was installed as archbishop did the authorities realize the sort of man they were up against. What they seemed not to have understood is that Wojtyla's approach was not direct confrontation of authorities who only seemed to understand the language of power, but the longer term task of undermining them through Christian "cultural resistance." He was not going to roll over and play dead before his oppressors, but would gradually pull the rug out from beneath their credibility, revealing their spiritual, moral, social, political, and cultural bankruptcy. Because of his Polish heritage in a country trapped between totalitarian Germany and Russia, the Pope has had a lifelong passion for human freedom. His two doctorates in philosophy were built around this topic, and it has been the subject of his most significant pronouncements. However, he is misunderstood if interpreted through the lenses of secular liberalism. His perception of freedom is that ultimately it is focused in obedience and self-giving to the One who died upon the Cross. In the middle is a chapter entitled "In the Eye of the Storm." It is

pivotal. The honeymoon was over, and the principalities and powers were out to neutralize his papacy. His approach had literally put him in the eye of political, social, and theological storms. This chapter deals with his response to and encouragement of the Gdansk shipyard strike in August 1980, and the rise of Solidarity in Poland. His affirmation of such activities put him on a collision course with the Soviet empire, and led to the unsuccessful assassination attempt of 1981. Weigel suggests that his constant challenge eroded the ability of an undemocratic Communism to survive. The Pope was a catalyst for world-shattering change. While all this was going on, the Pope was proceeding against what he perceived to be error within the church. It would seem that the policies he had outlined in the first years of his primacy were now taking on a shape and form that would have a profound impact upon the future -- these were an affirmation of human dignity, a passion for prayer and truth, the yearning for unity among Christians and peoples, and the evangelization of the world. His concern for evangelization is a key component of this man. He believes that for a human being to be truly free and whole, that person must surrender to the One who died for us. The Pope's faith is utterly Christ and Cross centered. He sees mission, unity, and truth belonging together, and that if truth or unity are compromised then mission suffers. Put simply, John Paul wants the world to know the good news about Jesus Christ that has led him throughout his own life to be utterly self-surrendering in order that the one to whom he surrenders may have the whole of him. This book is a winner.

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