

Missing the mark: Pope John Paul II and his pastor's heart

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Feeding the nuanced, complex mind of Pope John Paul II was a pastor's heart longing to continue priestly ministry even on the world stage. His prolific writings and numerous papal duties didn't keep the late pope from throwing direct lifelines to individual Catholics.

History's first Polish pope reinstituted the papal practice of hearing confessions on Good Friday. He officiated at baptisms, confirmations and marriages. Once, in the pasturelands of Argentina he elbowed out of the way a policeman who tried to keep the striding pope from pressing the flesh with some of the tens of thousands of people who came to hear him.

A book delving into the pastoral nature and inner strength of the parish priest turned pope and a dominant world figure in the second half of the 20th century would be an important service. It would help establish the overlooked human and ministerial side of the man etched in history as a central figure in toppling the Soviet bloc and in cementing Catholicism's place in contemporary world politics.

"Meet John Paul II: The People's Pope" by Janel Rodriguez and "Pope John Paul II: An Intimate Life" by Caroline Pigozzi attempt to find the humble but strong-willed priest who filled the chair of Peter. They provide easy, breezy reading but offer a superficial glimpse of the man behind the pope.

The main problem is that both authors are overwhelmed by their subject.

Rodriguez unabashedly considers Pope John Paul a saint and her book is written in the form of a hagiography, a biography that aims to prove that the subject was saintly even to the point of letting literary license slip in. So we learn that when the future pope was ordained a bishop, "with apparent divine timing, light streamed down and bathed the new bishop in its radiance."

This is not to deny solid evidence for the pope's canonization; but Rodriguez, a New York freelance writer, takes his sanctity as a given rather than building a case for it. Her introduction is titled "Santo Subito," the Italian for "sainthood quickly."

Pigozzi is simply overawed by the pope's strong character and personality. A reporter for Paris Match, the glossy French magazine, she saw him several times in his Vatican residence as she accompanied photographers for photo shoots. She also covered several papal trips with the papal press corps.

But she presents less of the intimate life of Pope John Paul and more of the people and furnishings that surrounded him. We learn the names of his barber and haberdasher. We also get a detailed description of the pope's bedroom and his cabin on the papal plane.

Both books have their brief insights. Pigozzi poignantly reports on the elderly pope's 2000 trip to Israel. This was his lifelong dream and she describes how the pope valiantly struggled to fulfill it although humbled and crippled by age, illnesses and the wounds from a 1981 assassination attempt.

Rodriguez goes into the pope's early life quoting from his poetry to show his spiritualization of manual labor, noting how this view was forged when he was forced to work in a rock quarry under the Nazi occupation of Poland during World War II.