The death of the Pope

Much of the news during the latter part of March and the first part of April was dominated by the sickness, death, and burial of Pope John Paul II. For more than twenty-five years this man ruled as the supreme pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church. Historically his reign was the third longest in Vatican history.

Why write about the Pope?

It was also one of the most remarkable, and as such it deserves some comment from this quarter. Of course, some of our readers may wonder about that. Why is a magazine that has the word “Reformed” in its subtitle, as in “a Canadian Reformed magazine,” devoting space and print to the leader of a church that receives so much criticism in some of its confessional documents? Both the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism have some rather pointed things to say about any number of Roman Catholic doctrines and teachings.

Still, to say nothing may well be interpreted as an abdication of responsibility. When it seems as if the entire world has this Pope on its mind, is it not worthy of some reflection and reaction on our part? In addition, also in Reformed circles, there is some confusion about how one should regard John Paul II and the Roman Catholic Church that he led for so many years.

Credit where credit is due

It is with this in mind that we forge ahead. The first thing that has to be said in all fairness and charity is that on a number of moral and ethical issues, as well as on some political matters, John Paul II took a courageous stand. Without fear and compromise he looked the leaders of communist Poland, his home country, in the eye and demanded freedom for its citizens. He did the same for other countries which at that time were behind the Iron Curtain. Indeed, history will almost surely record that this Pope played a major role in the downfall of communism in the East bloc and Russia.

On the medical ethical front, John Paul II repeatedly denounced the evil of abortion, the rise of active euthanasia, and the experimentation that continues to go on in the area of stem cell research using human embryos. He showed himself to be a real defender of the sanctity of human life. Along with this, he went out of his way to direct the attention of the world to the plight of the hungry, the oppressed, and the diseased in Africa and other troubled areas of the world. He was also sensitive to the needs and situations of the handicapped.

In the moral area, this Pope showed himself to be opposed to sexual immorality generally, as well as to homosexuality and same sex marriage specifically. He also remained a staunch supporter of sexual activity only within the bonds of marriage. Of course, these positions were and continue to be roundly attacked by both the left-leaning elements in his own church and by the worldly press. Nevertheless, he did not back down.

The result is that when it comes to these issues and areas we need to acknowledge that the Pope did what he could to stem the tide of perversion and secularism that is washing over so much of the world.

Continual concerns

However, this is not the entire picture. For when we now turn to the areas of Roman Catholic doctrine and practice there is much that disappoints and continues to dismay. In these areas Pope John Paul II was not a reforming pope but a rigid defender of the status quo.
The role of Scripture

With regard to the supremacy of Holy Scripture as the only rule of faith and life, John Paul continued to assert that church tradition plays an equally important role. In other words, he considered “custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees, and statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God” (BC, Art 7).

The Roman Catholic Church is a church weighed down by centuries of manmade customs and rules. A small part of that was evident in all the arrangements surrounding the sickness, death, and burial of the Pope. The administering of last rites, the three-fold tapping on the forehead, the processions of the body, the incense waving, the multiple chants, the endless religious ceremonies, all of these and more indicated that neither this Pope nor his church affirm the sufficiency of Holy Scripture. Indeed, as one viewed the proceedings it was as if tradition in all of its various forms overwhelmed everything else, and that included the Bible.

The place of Christ

With regard to the person and work of our Lord Jesus, we also need to make some comments. As Reformed believers most of our readers will gladly and thankfully assert that Christ is our only Mediator and our great Advocate. But what did John Paul II do during his reign? He became an aggressive promoter of adding to the list of the saints. According to him, the Roman Church needed more advocates and intercessors. Jesus Christ alone is not enough.

The cult of Mary

In addition, John Paul II did all that he could to advance the cause of Mary, the mother of our Lord. As Protestants we respect Mary as a woman of faith. We also recognize that God chose her to play a special role in the birth of his Son. At the same time, however, we have refused to venerate her. We do not believe that she was conceived without sin, that she escaped the grave and was assumed into heaven, that she has become the Co-Redemptrix (the co-redeemer with Christ), that she should be honoured as “The Mother of the Church” and “The Mother of God.” Indeed, we reject most emphatically this whole cult that has developed around Mary and about Mary.

John Paul II, however, never did. As a matter of fact, he was one of its greatest promoters. And what has been the result? In certain parts of the world like Poland, Latin America, and Africa, Mary receives more honour and worship than Christ. The ideal woman is more worshipped than her Son. And that is idolatry! It is a grave offence to the exalted person and work of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Other continual concerns

But there is more that is objectionable. There is Roman Catholic worship in which the mass remains central and in which the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is being repeated over and over again. His is not a finished work of salvation. It is a recycled work of endless death and dying.

There is the continued Roman Catholic contention that salvation comes through faith and works. True, on the one hand the Roman Catholic Church affirms that it believes in justification through faith, but it refuses to add the qualifier “alone” to it. The result is that human religious works of many types are seen as necessary components when it comes to salvation. It is not the grace of God that receives the credit. (Ephesians 2:5, 8).

Then too there are all sorts of extra doctrines and teachings that find no support in the Scriptures: purgatory, priestly celibacy, indulgences, marriage as sacrament, and so much more.

And what about the government of the Roman Catholic Church? At present Rome possesses the most hierarchical of all church political structures. The Pope is the head and the supposed Vicar of Christ, followed by the special officials at the Vatican, then the cardinals, the bishops and
archbishops, and so forth. Everything flows from the top down. Biblical eldership is unheard of. A biblical deaconate is none existent.

As I see it

What becomes obvious when one adds it all up is that while Pope John Paul II is to be commended for his social conscience and his moral courage, he cannot be commended when it comes to his support for many of the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. In some ways this church has changed after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). More and more of its members are reading and studying the Word. We can be thankful for that. Still, in too many of its basic tenets and fundamental ways, Rome remains Rome. Sadly, we still need to object to much of her doctrine and life, and to pray for her reform.

At least, that is how I see it.

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