

'Good Pope John' and 'John Paul the Great' slated for sainthood

By Christopher Guntz

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Two popes with different histories will likely be canonized by the end of the year, thanks to a decree signed by Pope Francis July 5. He accepted the verification of a second miracle attributed to Blessed John Paul II, and waived the requirement of a second miracle in the case of Blessed John XXIII.

Though they came from different cultural backgrounds and were elected at different ages, both John and John Paul sought to make the church more relevant in and for the modern world.

Elected at age 77, Cardinal Angelo Roncalli was expected to do little as pope. But John XXIII surprised the church - and the world - by convening the Second Vatican Council, a three-year exploration of faith and hope. Though his successor Paul VI finished the council, "Good Pope John" is credited for opening the doors and windows. It's been said that this was not so much to bring in the fresh air of the world, but to let out the light within the church so that all humanity could see and experience the joy of knowing the Lord.

Cardinal Karol Wojtyla's election in 1978 at age 58 stunned the world. The first Polish pope - and the first non-Italian pope in more than four centuries - he led the church for more than a quarter-century. At his funeral, shouts of "Santo subito" - "sainthood now" - rocked St. Peter's Square. His sense of reverence and his aura of holiness were obvious to those who encountered him.

Each in his own way, John and John Paul took the message of the Gospel into the world. In his opening address to the council, John XXIII explained why such an effort was necessary: "Certain it is that the critical issues, the thorny problems that wait upon men's solution, have remained the same for almost 20 centuries. And why? Because the whole of history and of life hinges on the person of Jesus Christ."

And as we all know, Blessed John Paul took that message on the road, telling the millions throughout the world who saw him in person that every human has dignity, and every human needs Jesus.

Sister Mary Ann Walsh, media relations director for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, points out that both John and John Paul II were emulating saints before becoming pope. "Saints show us how to live. Making it to the papacy is less a criterion for sainthood than leading a life of holiness that others can imitate," she wrote in a blog. "The holiness of Angelo Roncalli and Karol Wojtyla started way

before their papacies.”

If the formal recognition of their sainthood can inspire others, all the better. Their joint canonizations, perhaps on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Dec. 8, will be a wildly emotional, yet solemn event. You can expect Rome to be mobbed. More than a million people jammed St. Peter’s Square and the Via della Conciliazione May 1, 2011, for John Paul’s beatification. With devotees of the men called by many “Good Pope John” and “John Paul the Great” arriving from near and far, it’s likely there won’t be a place to stand - or kneel in gratitude - anywhere near the Vatican.

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