

Ten years later, echoes of John Paul's papacy

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It's hard to believe it has been 10 years since Pope John Paul II died at age 84. In that time, he was beatified and canonized. Two successors have been elected - and both are still living, quite unusual for the papacy. His work and words live on, as his homilies, messages, encyclicals and other writings sowed seeds in the thinking of Popes Benedict XVI and Francis.

In early 2005, as he was ailing, a small group of Catholic journalists gathered for a journey to Poland. In order to write effectively about the papal transition we knew was coming, we wanted to learn and write about the life of John Paul II. We knew his life was nearing its earthly end; he had been struggling valiantly for years with Parkinson's disease, and had been growing weaker.

As we gathered in New York for our flight to Poland, we heard the news: John Paul II was dead. Planned as a chance to learn about the people and places that shaped the life of Karol Wojtyla - who would become Pope John Paul II - the pilgrimage became all that and something much more. We landed in Poland as a nation mourned a beloved son - and father.

The first night in Krakow, we happened upon a massive candlelight vigil - impromptu, we later learned - in a park that had been the site of Masses celebrated by the pope. Thousands upon thousands of candles dotted the park. We worked our way through the crowd, hearing the pain and sorrow, listening to the prayers and songs.

Familiar was one we know as "Lord, You Have Come to the Seashore," or "Pescadores de Hombres." The Polish version, we were told, was one of John Paul's favorites. It's about how the Lord calls each of us to follow him.

At the Archbishop's Residence in Krakow, where Cardinal Wojtyla had lived while he was the archbishop, people came at all hours of the day to pray. After one long day of writing and sending photos and stories back to the states via computer, a few of us returned there at 1 a.m. The crowd was still incredible, its members lighting candles and weaving their prayers with the tapestry of others.

Our planned itinerary took us to Warsaw later in the week, which serendipitously

brought us to the capital city on the day of the pope's funeral. We joined hundreds of thousands who watched the funeral broadcast live in the city's Pilsudski Square, tears in their eyes.

Later that evening, a quarter-million people thronged the streets of Warsaw in a candlelight march. At 9:37 p.m., the time John Paul had died six days earlier, the procession stopped. The mourners raised their voices in song, and then, as one, burst into an ovation that lasted several minutes. I know now the literal meaning of the term "thunderous applause" - as the sound rolled along the streets and echoed off the buildings, it set off car alarms.

Ten years later - and many decades from now - the thunderous echoes of St. John Paul's papacy will still be heard.

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