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Catholic Leader's Death Comes After Long and Public Illness

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In 1978, he came to office as a fit and handsome 58 year-old, blessed with a charisma, intellectual vigor and energy that took him to 129 foreign countries as the pulse of the Catholic church moved away from Europe to Africa, Asia and Latin America.

He served either the second or third longest of any pope, depending who did the counting, in the nearly 2,000-year history of the papacy - making him the only Pope whom many young and middle-aged Catholics around the world remember clearly.

A Pole chosen as the first non-Italian pope in 455 years, he transformed the papacy into a television-ready voice for peace, war and life, from the womb to the wheelchair. He also reached beyond religion into politics, encouraging his fellow Poles and other Europeans to reject Communism. Some historians believe he deserves part of the credit for the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union.

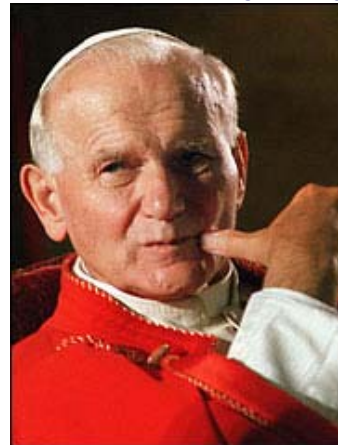
Even as his own voice faded away, his views on the sanctity of all human life echoed unambiguously among Catholics and Christian evangelicals in the United States on issues from abortion to the end of life.

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John Paul II's admirers were as passionate as his detractors, for whom his long illness served as a symbol for what they said was a decrepit, tradition-bound papacy in need of rejuvenation and a bolder connection with modern life.

"The situation in the Catholic church is serious," Hans Kung, the eminent Swiss theologian, who was barred by from teaching in Catholic schools because of his liberal views, wrote last week. "The pope is gravely ill and deserves every

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Derrick Ceyrac/AFP – Getty Images
Pope John Paul II at a mass at Strasbourg Cathedral in Oct. 1988.

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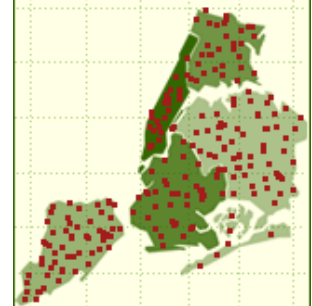
Frank Bruni looks back on the extraordinary papacy of Karol Wojtyla of Poland.

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