

# THE RHETORIC OF POPE JOHN PAUL II



Edited by **JOSEPH R. BLANEY**  
and **JOSEPH P. ZOMPETTI**

# The Rhetoric of Pope John Paul II

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A.M.D.G. & *pax vobiscum*  
Joseph R. Blaney & Joseph P. Zompetti



# Introduction

Joseph R. Blaney & Joseph P. Zompetti

When one thinks of great orators, people usually articulate the obvious list of politicians and social activists. After some careful thought, religious leaders come to mind as well. But, in the Roman Catholic faith, bishops, priests, and pontiffs are usually remembered for their careful wisdom or their gentle visits to hospitals rather than their fiery discourse about social events. Even when a Pope declares something *ex cathedra*, most audience members read it as a document from the Church, and not the rhetoric of a single orator.

When we remember Pope John Paul II, however, we think of a different type of Roman Catholic orator. Indeed, of the great twentieth-century speakers, Pope John Paul clearly ranks among them. But why does this Pope differ so markedly from previous pontiffs? How did he become such a great rhetorician? In what ways can we remember him as a magnificent master of public address?

A book such as this hopes to entice the general reader, interested in the life of Pope John Paul II, to read about the specific issues dealt with in the volume. Of course, we also hope that religious scholars will find this book important in their work with how the Pope managed issues in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Perhaps most important, however, the book is meant to highlight the significance of rhetoric. In general, rhetoric is important in how it operates in our daily lives. More specifically, however, we aim to show how rhetoric was vital in the life of Pope John Paul II and, as a result, to the millions of Catholics worldwide.

The particular purposes of the book include the following. First, we hope to shed insight into how Pope John Paul II dealt with some very important issues of the last century that continue to confront us even today. Second, the book aims to examine the persuasive discourse of Pope John Paul II. As one of the most important leaders in the world, we believe the Pope's articulations not only speak for the entirety of the Roman Catholic Church, but they also signify important rhetorical contributions from a skillful and experienced leader. Third, rhetoric cuts both ways—the rhetoric by Pope John Paul II and the rhetoric about him. Thus, the book aims to investigate how others perceived Pope John Paul II. In other words, the book will examine the rhetoric *about* the Pope. Fourth, the book seeks to pay tribute to one of the most influential and popular men of the last century. While many biographies and testaments to the pontiff have been written, we believe that a discussion of his actual words, and the words about him, will provide a perpetual homage for, arguably, one of the greatest leaders of recent history. Finally, the book is meant to analyze the role of rhetoric in areas involving Pope John Paul II—something before now that has not been done.

Credited with the solidarity movement in Poland, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, reforms within Russia, and leading the charge for democratization throughout the world, it is clear that Pope John Paul was not only concerned with Catholic theology, but also with the important social events of our time. To be sure, Pope John Paul's political positions were premised on his faith and, most certainly, were meant to guide the Church in a certain direction. Nevertheless, the Pope's secular—albeit political, sociological, and economic—messages are at least as important, if not more so, than his theological contributions to Catholic doctrine.

We would be remiss, however, to quickly gloss over some of Pope John Paul's theological contributions. During some of the most turbulent times faced by the Church—sex scandals, plummeting numbers of clergy, historical accountability, and so forth—Pope John Paul remained steadfast in his unwavering commitment to Vatican II and the Church's *magisterium*. As we shall see, writers of this volume explore some of the significant theological rhetoric of Pope John Paul.

Simply put, whether we explore Pope John Paul's written manuscripts, his speeches, or the commentary about his works, we can see a very important person for twentieth-century rhetoric. As such, this book promises to explore the dynamic contributions of a very complicated and revered man. Furthermore, while the authors within this book dive into the depths of the richness of Pope John Paul's perspicacity, readers can be assured they will discover the diverse splendor of a genuine and wise leader.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS BOOK

Pope John Paul II has been deemed one of the greatest Popes of all time. While many books commemorate his life, none have documented the oral and rhetorical contributions he made to both Catholicism and to life in general. As a survivor of Nazi occupation as well as a product of our contemporary world, Pope John Paul is a testament to our postmodern condition of subjectivity. Trapped in a world of material possessions and technological pursuits, the religious and pious individual has very little maneuverability. As a sincere and extremely religious pontiff, Pope John Paul II witnessed and served the planet in an effort to improve social justice, environmentalism, and Christian faith. In this way, Pope John Paul's rhetoric is an important indicator of the pontiff's thoughts and feelings not only on the state of the world, but also on the promising path the world could take toward faith, justice, and freedom.

This book is not only timely given Pope John Paul's recent passing, but since it attempts to capture the essence of his rhetoric, it is also timely in its portrayal of the pontiff's passion and persuasion. In other words, this book attempts to capture the essence of a great rhetor—one that the twentieth century respected as both a theological as well as a secular guide. Covering key issues such as social justice, communism, sex and the Church, the Church's treatment of Mary, and so on, this book is a valuable contribution to the study of Pope John Paul II, the Roman Catholic faith, and rhetoric in general.

We also present this book in the spirit of the notion that rhetoric is epistemic (Scott, 1967). As the backbone for knowledge-generation, it is important to remember that studying rhetoric is crucial for our understanding of how we learn and what we know about the world around us. More specifically, the rhetoric of a historical figure and leader helps us not only to understand more about the rhetor themselves, but also about the society in which they lived.

Authors of this book examine the pontiff's major speeches, his most significant postulates, and his key pronouncements as the Holy See. As such, this text is one of the few books that explore the vast array of rhetoric from a single Pope. In addition to analyzing rhetoric from historical, political, and cultural contexts, the authors use various rhetorical theories and approaches. Specifically, the book utilizes perspectives from Kenneth Burke, feminism, genre criticism, framing, image restoration/*apologia*, and ideological analysis. With some of the foremost scholars in the field, the book focuses on different rhetorical approaches to the ongoing study of Pope John Paul II's significance to the Catholic Church and to the global community as a whole.

In this way, this book is significant in its scope of Pope John Paul's rhetoric. We have tried to cast a broad net to examine the various ways that Pope John Paul engaged in rhetoric, as well as the rhetoric surrounding him. In both the Pope's written and oral discourse, authors of this volume analyze the critical contributions of the Pope as well as significant critiques of his rhetoric. As far as we can tell, there is not another volume that investigates a Pope's discourse with such veracity, detail, and comprehensiveness as this book.

### CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS BOOK

Given the length of John Paul's tenure as Pope, the amount of rhetoric about the pontiff as well as the rhetoric from him is immense. This book strives to examine a representation of this rhetoric, but we realize that certain topics may be unexplored. Perhaps those areas will be fertile ground for another volume. For now, we strongly believe that what the contributors of this volume present are unprecedented, timely, and significant. As such, we've assembled the different chapters into four main parts: Pope John Paul II and the media, the rhetoric of social justice, political rhetoric, and theological rhetoric. We hope that this sorting provides a sensible and organized approach for the reader's understanding of the rhetoric surrounding Pope John Paul II.

Regarding the Pope and the media, authors Kaylor and Compton provide an interesting analysis of how comics, especially late-night show hosts, treated Pope John Paul in general, and his death in particular. In a related way, Benoit and Stein discuss the Catholic Church sex scandal in relation to cartoons. More specifically, they suggest that cartoons form a type of genre, or "kategoria," that help us understand the rhetoric of someone like Pope John Paul II. Some of the other chapters in this book touch on the subject of media portrayals of Pope John Paul II, but Part 1 of the book specifically addresses how media, especially comedic media, dealt with the late pontiff.

The second part of the book concerns Pope John Paul II's involvement with social justice issues. Zompetti argues that John Paul not only commissioned the latest *Catechism*, but he was also instrumental in its production. Further, Zompetti suggests that Pope John Paul II's commitment to social justice is found in the messages of the *Catechism* which outlines the official doctrines of the Church. Then, Cutbirth and Houge present an intriguing argument that the Pope's opposition of the U.S. invasion of Iraq is premised on the concept of Just War, suggesting that, in accordance with Augustine, military engagement is only permissible under strict circumstances. The hope, of course, is that such criteria will decrease the

amount of conflict. Next, Edwards argues that the Pope's speeches concerning the Jubilee Year (the year 2000)—years in the Catholic tradition for atonement and restoration—were focused on improving the Church's image. In light of many issues and scandals involving the Church, Pope John Paul II used the Jubilee Year to ask for and initiate a process of atonement and reconciliation. These are important chapters since, according to many, Pope John Paul II was a key leader for advocating social justice.

Part 3 of the book concerns the pope and political rhetoric. Of course, the Vatican, as a nation-state, is integrally implicated in the politics of the world. And yet, with Pope John Paul II the role of the Vatican was even more intense. Many have credited the pontiff with ushering in *perestroika*, initiating *solidarity* in Poland, and influencing the West and the East in arms talks. Our authors do not take these involvements lightly. Ornato-wski, in his chapter, and Burns in his, both offer a detailed explanation of the Pope's role in the political events in Poland. They both suggest that Pope John Paul II had an instrumental role in the political events in not only Poland, but also Eastern Europe as a whole. Finally, the Drumhellers discuss Pope John Paul II's message during Communications Day. His political philosophy is quite evident in his appearance and performance in Communications Day. The impact Pope John Paul II had on such events should become apparent.

Finally, part 4 of the book examines Pope John Paul II's rhetoric on the theology of the Church. This is our largest part of the book, and for good reason. Pope John Paul II is probably the single-most influential pontiff of the twentieth century on the doctrine of the Church. As such, Blaney discusses the Pope's reaction and response to the sex scandals involving primarily American priests. At the heart of most Catholics was how to reconcile such scandals with the theology of the Church, and Blaney examines that central question. Next, Kennedy investigates the Church—and by extension Pope John Paul II—to the issue and role of women in the Church. Primarily, Kennedy investigates the role of Mary, but the larger issue is the role of women in general in the Church. The next chapter, by Cali, argues that the discourse of Pope John Paul II is a complex interplay of multiple forms of messages. By using speeches, letters, and encyclicals—but primarily encyclicals—the pope not only helped to guide a globe of believers, but also helped to shape *how* they believe. In the subsequent chapter by Father Layden, we see how Pope John Paul II was an instrumental figure for clergy. Layden describes the significance of the pontiff on priests while Pope John Paul II was the Holy See. In many ways, this chapter sheds integral perspectives on Pope John Paul II's influence on theology that we might otherwise not know. Finally, the Pope's impact on theology is seen in Chidester's chapter on how the Catholic Church, under Pope John Paul II's leadership, deals with other religious

beliefs. In Chidester's case, it is the Church of Latter Day Saints. Chidester does a thorough job of explaining the intricate relationship between the two faiths, which opens up insights on how the two religions can co-exist and negotiate their differences.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

In the end, the multiple chapters of this book have at least one thing in common—that is that Pope John Paul II was an accomplished rhetor who knew how to craft messages. Some of the chapters in this book are critical of how the pontiff handled such situations, while others revere him as one of the greatest orators of the twentieth century. The main point is that Pope John Paul II could either positively or negatively impact his audience—regardless of the location—not because he was a bad orator, but rather the opposite. He knew that some people would disagree with him. However—and perhaps more important—he hoped that many more would agree with him than not. At the end of the day, he was probably correct.

### REFERENCE

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I

POPE JOHN PAUL II  
AND THE MEDIA



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# Papal Punchlines: Late Night Comedic Treatment of Pope John Paul II

Brian T. Kaylor & Josh A. Compton

Twenty years ago, Gardner (1986) quipped, “One does not dig too deeply into the logic of a Johnny Carson monologue” (p. 46). But as recent scholarship attests, the academic community *is* digging deeper into late night comedy. Political scientists (e.g., Baum, 2002; Cooper & Bates, 2003; Davis & Owen, 1998; Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003) and communication scholars (e.g., Compton, 2006; Compton & Kaylor, 2005; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2004; Pfau, 2002; Pfau, Cho, & Chong, 2001; Pfau & Eveland, 1996; Smith & Voth, 2002; Young, 2003a, 2003b, 2004) have turned their attention to the nature and possible effects of late night comedy on viewers’ attitudes and knowledge. Though previous research has added nuance to our understanding of late night comedy, scholars continue to call for more scrutiny of it (e.g., Baum, 2003; Compton, 2006; Cooper & Bates, 2003; Davis & Owen, 1998; Smith & Voth, 2002; Zaller, 2003). The death of the popular Pope John Paul II provides a unique opportunity to explore how late night comics deal with sensitive issues and can offer valuable insight into media portrayals of the Pope and the Catholic Church.

## POPE’S ILLNESS AND DEATH

Though the Vatican ignored the speculation for years, many believed the Pope showed signs of Parkinson’s disease for nearly two decades before his death (Underwood, 2005). In the mid-1990s, speculation arose about the Pope’s condition and possible Parkinson’s. In the late 1990s and early

2000s, a few Bishops and Cardinals, including Joseph Ratzinger, began suggesting that the Pope may or even should step down because of his health (Blitz, 2002). In January 2001, the Pope's doctor confirmed that the Pope did indeed have Parkinson's (Delaney, 2001). After the Pope missed some Holy Week ceremonies in March 2002, there were reports that some Cardinals were pushing for the Pope to resign (Owen, 2002). Though Pope John Paul II insisted he would remain as Pope, he did cancel a number of events and trips during the last few years of his papacy (Simpson & Holley, 2002). In May 2003, a Vatican official acknowledged the Pope's Parkinson's for the first time, though it was barely reported since few had doubted it (Winfield, 2003). In his final months, the eighty-four-year-old Pope was placed on breathing and feeding tubes as he suffered from speech, breathing, and swallowing problems, which doctors explained as common symptoms in the advanced stages of Parkinson's disease (Bor, 2005). The Pope also suffered from bladder problems leading to septic shock shortly before his death, which is also linked to Parkinson's (Underwood, 2005). Pope John Paul II had served as Pope over 26 years, making his papacy the third longest in Catholic history, and he was the only Pope that millions of Catholics had known in their own lifetimes.

Late night comics occasionally referred to Pope John Paul II during his papacy. *The Frontrunner* database of late night monologues includes forty-five jokes mentioning the Pope or the Vatican prior to his death, though all are post-1999. Most of these jokes were about politicians and their interaction with the Pope, such as those mocking Bill Clinton for his "sins" or questioning George W. Bush's intelligence. Other jokes dealt with the Catholic priest abuse scandal. However, a few subtly referred to Pope John Paul II's illness. Jay Leno made a couple of jokes suggesting that Dick Cheney's health condition was worse than the Pope's, and David Letterman told two jokes that addressed the Pope's health in comparison with Bush. For instance, on June 7, 2004, he joked:

Over the weekend President Bush met with the Pope in Rome. Did you see the picture of the two of them together? Man, that poor guy, I mean, he has that blank look on his face, and like he does not know where he is. And then the Pope told him, "Well, just be quiet and relax, and it will be fine."

He made essentially the same joke on January 31, 2005, just over two months before the Pope's death. That was the last pre-death Pope joke in the database.

However, while late night comics treaded carefully around the topic of the Pope's illness prior to his death, other media outlets found themselves embroiled in controversy over jokes about the Pope's condition and impending death. In the few months prior to the Pope's death, a newspaper

and two ministers were condemned for Pope jokes that were considered inappropriate by many. In early March, *The New York Press* ran a front-page story with fifty-two jokes about the Pope being dead, and controversy quickly erupted as many did not find the jokes appropriate. One joke described the dead Pope as looking like a baboon, and another said that following the Pope's death doctors "discovered that not only was the Pope a woman, but also Hitler" (Colon, 2005, ¶10). In the fallout, the paper's editor defended the jokes but ultimately quit after being suspended without pay by the publisher. In Ireland, a Presbyterian minister cracked jokes and imitated the Pope's Parkinson's at a concert on February 11. He was attacked for offending both Catholics and those with Parkinson's, and many critics publicly demanded his resignation. He apologized shortly after the Pope's death, but did not step down (Sherriff, 2005). In New Zealand, a minister cracked jokes about the Pope in a March 3 sermon. He referred to a recent speech by the Pope and stated, "He looked pretty much dead when he was speaking, for years really. . . . Why do they keep them going like that? [Do] they have a wind-up thing behind them or something?" ("Pastor apologises," 2005, ¶3-4). After some controversy, the minister apologized to the church following the Pope's death.

Considering the controversial, sensitive context and the backlash against those who did make light of the Pope and his illness, one might have expected that the late night comics would steer clear of mentioning the Pope's death. On the other hand, how could the comics, who thrive on current events for jokes, ignore the most dominant news story? This study explores how the late night comics negotiated the delicate balance between covering the story while not offending the viewing audience.

### LATE NIGHT COMEDY

Millions watch late night television. About 7 million viewers tune in to *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno and about 4.5 million watch *The Late Show with David Letterman* each night (Baum, 2003), with regular viewers less educated (Davis & Owen, 1998), less politically attentive (Baum, 2003; Davis & Owen, 1998) and younger (Hamilton, 2003) than viewers of conventional news programs. Late night television comedy programs increasingly address political issues (Davis, 1997; Davis & Owens, 1998; Kerbel, 1998; Pfau, 2002). One estimate suggests that Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O'Brien tell an average of nine political knowledge jokes each night ("Late Night Humor Bounces Back," 2002), and late night variety shows, such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, regularly feature politically themed skits and parodies (Smith & Voth, 2002).