

June 1979 – The Nine Days of John Paul II

George Weigel



The Catholic Difference

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Thirty years ago this week, the Bishop of Rome returned to Poland for the first time since his recent election to the papacy.

America's premier Cold War historian, John Lewis Gaddis of Yale, is not ambiguous in his judgment of what happened next: "When John Paul II kissed the ground at the Warsaw airport on June 2, 1979, he began the process by which communism in Poland – and ultimately everywhere – would come to an end."

Professor Gaddis is right: the Nine Days of John Paul II, June 2 to 10, 1979, were an epic moment on which the history of the 20th century pivoted, and in a

more humane direction.

What did John Paul talk about during the Nine Days?

He didn't talk about politics; indeed, beyond the ritual exchanges of formalities with government officials at the arrival ceremony in Warsaw on June 2 and the departure ceremony from Cracow on June 10, the Pope acted as if the Polish communist regime did not exist.

Rather, he spoke over, around, and beyond the regime directly to the people of Poland, not about what the world usually understands as power, but about people power – the power of culture and spiritual identity. "You are not who 'they' say you are," the Pope proposed, in a number of variations on

the same theme; "let me remind you who you really are."

During the Nine Days of June 1979, John Paul II gave back to his people their history, their culture, and their identity.

In doing so, he gave Poles spiritual tools of resistance that communism could not match. And he did all that by reminding his people that "Poland" began with its 10th century baptism – with its incorporation into the Christian world.

That reminder created a moral revolution that eventually brought down the communist god that failed.

For on June 4, 1989, Solidarity swept the first reasonably free elections in post-war

Polish history and set in motion an unstoppable chain of events across east central Europe. The Iron Curtain collapsed in Poland, five months before the Berlin Wall fell in Germany.

What can we learn from the Nine Days, three decades later? Several important things, I'd suggest.

The first thing the Nine Days and the subsequent Solidarity revolution teach us is that history doesn't work through politics and economics alone. The power of the human spirit can ignite world-historical change.

The second lesson from the Nine Days is that tradition can be as powerful a force for dramatic social and political change as a revolutionary rupture with the past.

"Revolution," in the

Solidarity experience, meant the recovery of lost values and cultural truths and their creative re-application to new situations. Tradition, according to an old theological maxim, is the living faith of the dead – a lively faith that can move history forward rather than dragging it backwards.

The third thing we ought to learn from the Nine Days and what followed in Poland is that moral conviction can be the lever once sought by Archimedes – the lever with which to move the world. There is nothing more potent in history, for good or ill, than ideas.

The history of the 20th century prior to 1979 had been unspeakably bloody because of the power of false ideas and lies.

The Solidarity revolution proved that the opposite could also be true, with its insistence on truth-telling amidst the communist culture of prevarication (or, as one famous slogan of the

day had it, "For Poland to be Poland, 2+2 must always = 4").

The fourth thing we learn from the Nine Days and the moral revolution they ignited is that "public life" and "politics," "civil society" and "politics" are not the same. Rather, the health of politics depends on the moral health of civil society.

And the fifth thing we learn about from the Nine Days of John Paul II is what the Pope later came to call "the subjectivity of society."

Free associations of men and women who are citizens, not subjects, are where democrats are made, for it's in those free associations that we learn the habits of heart and mind that make it possible for us to be self-governing.

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The anatomy of sacrifice in our lives through Christ

Father Ron Rolheiser



Holy Longing

The surrender of something of value for the sake of something else.

What do we mean when we say that we make a sacrifice? I have sacrificed my career for my children! I sacrifice a lot for my job! Love demands that we make many sacrifices! Sometimes we must sacrifice life itself for the sake of integrity! Christ sacrificed himself for our sins! The Eucharist is a sacrifice!

From what is common in all these expressions we can extract Webster's definition of a sacrifice: The surrender of something of value for the sake of something else.

That is a good definition, but it contains more than first meets the eye, as is evident when we look at the concept of sacrifice in the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

Take, for example, the famous story where Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. What is ultimately behind God's invitation to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on an altar?

These are the outer elements of the story: Abraham has longed for a son for many years. Finally, after the situation was humanly hopeless, Sarah conceives and he is given a son, Isaac, who is the described as Abraham's "only one", his "precious one". But then God invites Abraham to take Isaac and offer him in sacrifice. Abraham, with a heavy heart, agrees to the request and sets off with Isaac, carrying wood, fire, and a knife, all the while having to answer his son's curiosity about why they were not bringing a victim for the sacrifice.

When they arrive at the place of sacri-

fice, Abraham gathers the wood, lights the fire, binds Isaac, and then raises the knife to kill him. But God intervenes, stops the sacrifice, and gives Abraham a ram instead to offer. The story ends with Abraham walking back to his own land together with Isaac. What is the deep lesson inside this story?

At one level, the lesson is that God does not want human sacrifice, but there is a deeper, more intimate, inner lesson that teaches us something about the innate need inside of us to offer sacrifice. Simply put, the lesson is this: In order for something to be received as a gift it must be received twice. What is implied here?

A gift, by definition, is something that is not deserved but given freely. What is our first impulse when we are

given a gift? Our instinctual response is: "I can't take this! I don't deserve this!" In essence, that gesture, that healthy instinctual response, is an attempt to give the gift back to its giver. But, of course, the giver refuses to take the gift back and re-gives it to us with the assurance: "But I want you to have this!" When we receive it the second time, it is now more properly ours because, by trying to give it back, we healthily recognized that it was a gift, unmerited, undeserved.

That is the exact set of dynamics within the story of Abraham offering to sacrifice Isaac. Isaac comes to him as the greatest, most-undeserved, gift of his life. His willingness to sacrifice him parallels the instinctual gesture: "I don't deserve this! I can't accept this!" He offers the gift back to its giver. But the giver, Love itself, stops the gesture and gives the gift the second

time. Now Abraham can receive Isaac, without guilt, as gift. When they are walking back home, Isaac is now Abraham's son in a way that he never was before. Abraham had to receive the gift twice by sacrificing it the first time.

That is the essence of sacrifice: To properly receive anything, including life itself, requires that we recognize it precisely as gift, as something undeserved. And to do that requires sacrifice, a willingness to give some or the entire gift back to its giver.

We see this as the dynamic underlying the ritual of ancient sacrifice. For example: A farmer would harvest a crop. But, before he or his family would eat a even mouthful of it, he would take some of it (the "first-fruits") and offer it back to God in the form of a sacrifice, usually by burning it so that the smoke rising up to the heavens would take some of the crop back to God whom the farmer saw as the real giver of that crop.

After sacrificing some of it in this way, the farmer and his family could now enjoy the rest of it without guilt because, by trying to give it back to its author, they made themselves more aware that it was gift. They can now enjoy it without guilt precisely because, through sacrifice, they have acknowledged it as gift.

That's the inner essence of all sacrifice, whether the sacrificing of a career for the sake of our children or Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Sacrifice recognizes gift as gift. Like Abraham, it tries to give the gift back to the giver, but the giver stops the sacrifice and gives it back in even a deeper way.

We would enjoy our lives considerably more if we understood that.

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