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- ['Early' deadline nears for Congress 2002](#)
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Friday, August 24, 2001

## Remembering Cardinal Karol, 25 years later

By Brenda Rees and Mike Nelson



It is one of Msgr. August Moretti's fondest memories, driving the visitor from Poland down the Harbor Freeway toward the South Bay and Marineland, singing "Santa Lucia" with him, and talking about their first meeting in Rome a few years earlier.

That's when there was still a Marineland, and when Cardinal Karol Jozef Wojtyla was still the archbishop of Krakow, and when most of America was in the midst of a bicentennial celebration and couldn't have told one Polish visitor from the next. But Msgr. Moretti was well aware that his traveling companion -- in Los Angeles to help celebrate the golden jubilee of Our Lady of the Bright Mount Church -- had numerous gifts -- notably, a keen intellect and an extraordinary command of languages -- and a presence that, in his opinion, destined him for much more in service to the Catholic Church.



"He had a magic personality, something that could connect with anyone," recalls Msgr. Moretti, now pastor of Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Pasadena. "In a meeting, he could put anyone at ease, especially young people, and make you feel like you were the only person in the room."

Two years later, Msgr. Moretti happened to be in Rome, visiting the city of his birth, when the College of Cardinals was electing a successor to the deceased Pope John Paul I. "I told a colleague, 'You watch -- if they [the cardinals] go outside of Italy to pick a new pope, they'll take Wojtyla.'"

And so they did, and the rest is history. A quarter century after the first visit of Pope John Paul II to the City of Angels, there is still great affection for the former archbishop of Krakow in the largest archdiocese in the United States, including Los Angeles' Polish Catholic community which fondly recalls his visit -- and the day in 1978 when they learned that Cardinal Wojtyla was named pope.

"I was working at the hospital as a nurse and my superior couldn't wait to talk to me. 'Didn't you hear the news?'" says Rose Zachowski, a parishioner at St. Mary Magdalen Church in Camarillo. "I was so happy. I couldn't believe it. A Polish man became the pope!"



Such enthusiasm for a fellow Pole took root from that Aug. 29-30, 1976 visit in conjunction with the 50th anniversary celebration of Our Lady of the Bright Mount Church, just southwest of downtown Los Angeles. At the time, Cardinal Wojtyla was one of 17 Polish bishops who had attended a Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia and then traveled, whirlwind-style, through the U.S. to meet members of the Polish Catholic community.



Cathedral of  
Our Lady of the  
Angels

## comments

What  
do you  
think?



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During his brief L.A. stop (even briefer than his more celebrated Los Angeles papal visit in September 1987), the cardinal presided at two Masses at Our Lady of the Bright Mount Church, which had served the local Polish community since 1926, and was officially established as a parish a year later. He also greeted many in Los Angeles' Polish community, including several of his former priest colleagues who had come to America to serve, having (in some cases) escaped repression by first the Nazis and then the Communists during and after World War II.

Understandably, there was a joyful spirit present at the golden jubilee, just as there was earlier this summer at the 75th anniversary of Our Lady of the Bright Mount Church. In no small measure, that spirit emanates from having a Polish pope who, at the same time, is regarded as one who seeks to unite all people in the name of Jesus.

Msgr. Moretti, director of the archdiocesan Tribunal at the time of the 1976 visit, had met John Paul two years earlier at a conference in Rome. "I saw how he could collect the opinions of 10 or 15 other people and merge them into a common ground, blend them into a single thought," he says. "I felt that was an amazing ability."

And there are also his personal qualities -- including strength of character and a charismatic warmth -- which have made him an unforgettable presence to all who have met him, whether here or elsewhere. Society of Christ Father Wojciech Kania, currently in residence at Our Lady of the Bright Mount, remembers having met Cardinal Wojtyla several years prior to his Los Angeles visit.



"I was in Calgary in 1969 and he came up to visit and he was wonderful. I picked him up at the airport," recalls Father Kania. Later, when a parishioner asked if the cardinal could baptize his daughter, the cardinal obliged without a flinch. "He is a generous man and you could see that right away with him," says Father Kania.

Even though Father Kania was not at Our Lady of the Bright Mount when Cardinal Wojtyla came in 1976, he has a theory about the pope's post-election ceremonies that connects the humble parish to the Vatican.

"After his election as pope, the cardinals all come up and pay homage to him as is tradition," explains Father Kania. "Well, the pope was just here in L.A. before his election. So when Cardinal [Timothy] Manning went up to him and talked, I think they were talking about our parish -- the cardinal thanking the pope for coming and making this a Polish parish. We were there!"

Father Kania points out some characteristics of the pope that he believes are general Polish traits.

"His devotion to the Blessed Mother is a very Polish trait," he says. "His humility is another. He doesn't think that he is so high above the rest. He is very simple, down-to-earth, yet he is very instructed, well-learned."



Stanislaw K. Cybulski agrees, having met the cardinal in 1976. "He was doing an interview for our local radio show," says Cybulski, president of the Friends of John Paul II Foundation of Southern California, an organization dedicated to promote Polish culture through education.

"When I first met him, I just knew this was a person who would go on to do great things. He has that kind of magnetic personality," recalls Cybulski. "When he talked to you, it was as if he knew you all your life. You were not a stranger. Also, when you talked with him, you became the most important person to him at that moment."

For the radio show, the cardinal discussed the church in Poland that was weighing heavy under Communist rule. He gave a concrete example of a church he wanted to build in a certain part of town.

"The cardinal fought for so many years to get it built," says Cybulski. "Even when he became pope the church wasn't completed yet. When it was finally done in 1979, it became a symbol for not just Catholics but for Polish people that they could do it. They could have what they have been fighting for all these years."



The pope's encouragement to his fellow Poles sparked the Solidarity movement that eventually toppled the Communist regime. During his first trip back to Poland after being named pope, John Paul II -- addressing a crowd of one million people -- told them: "You are men. You have dignity. Don't crawl on your bellies."

Cybulski says that John Paul II's early life mirrors many lives in Poland at that time. "He lost his mother at such an early age, and then his older brother. He was poor. His father -- a retired army officer -- died when he was 20 years old. Cardinal Wojtyla was without family for most of his life. Reading those accounts, I've never come across so many negative things working against someone.

"Yet he had beliefs and that power within him to overcome these pains. One thing I admire greatly is his courage."

"My father came from the same village -- Wadowice -- where the pope was born and raised," adds Zachowski who explains that the pope to her is a "very special person."

"He had to assume great burdens, like reconciling the church with the Jewish people. It must be so difficult to do, I can't imagine it," she says, adding that his humility and generosity is what she wants people in the future to remember about John Paul II.

Indeed, the pope is a strong spiritual figure who can transcend religious limitations. "He has a very open heart and embraces all people," reflects Missionary Sister of Christ the King Sister Bozena Blad. "But he is not just for us Catholics; no, he is for all peoples. He is important because he can unite us all."



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