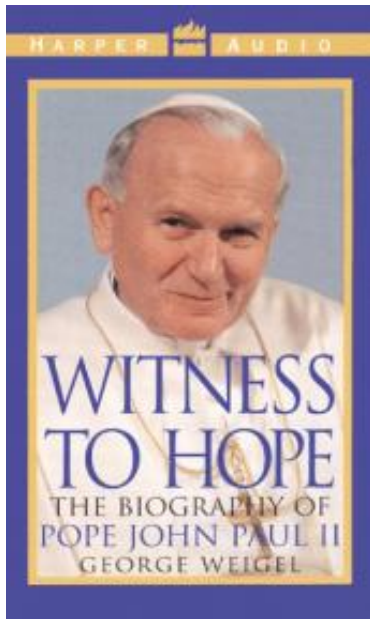

Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II - by George Weigel - (1999), 990 pages.



Our Library already has two substantive biographies of the Pope written in English by Ted Szulc and by Carl Bernstein (Jointly with Marco Politi), both of which we reviewed on these pages in Jan'97; also a few months later we paid attention to the Pope's own book Gift and Mystery, presenting his ruminations about the priestly vocation. But now we have a hefty volume which in the eyes of many will be considered a definitive biography because of its scope, attention to minute details, overwhelming bibliography, and two thousand footnotes. Above all, it comes from a true expert on matters theological. Shortly before undertaking, this tremendous task, the author gave a keynote address at an important Vatican conference related to religious freedom, following which the Pope gracefully endorsed the idea of this particular biography. As Weigel informs us he has spent 20 years studying and writing about the Pope, and this book is, in effect, culmination of his research. The result is most impressive.

In these few paragraphs we can only touch upon a few aspects of this work. Firstly, if the reader's time is limited or the area of theology unfamiliar, the book can be easily scanned because of its clear organization: 6 chapters describe the Pope's life before his election, and with 14 chapters are devoted to his life as Pope. Each chapter begins with a helpful introduction listing in chronological order a dozen or more dates that are important in the activities of Karol Wojtyła, and the narrative faithfully follows these dates. Thus it is very easy to find the part in which the reader may have a particular interest.

Secondly, the casual reader may well note that the book has a superb Prologue and Epilogue; these pages are brilliantly written and offer a synopsis of this important Papacy. Weigel offers his strongly held views about the person he obviously admires. He submits that the Pope is an intellectual who is un beholden to the shibboleths of the professoriat and who has a deep admiration for untutored popular piety. He has had a considerable impact on world affairs, evincing not the slightest interest in management theory or in politics. He was blessed with great mentors, but he is primarily an autodidact who learns quickly from experience. He has demonstrated an ability to inspire the largest crowds in human history, but he has never been a demagogue. He is a disciple known for the intensity of his love, like the Apostle John, who has been called to exercise an office of authority and jurisdiction in the Church, like the apostle Peter. In all fairness, the author discusses opposing views held by the Pope's critics. - - Weigel's comments are, of course, much more extensive and thorough than can be mentioned here.

Thirdly a great part of this work is devoted to a thorough analysis of the Pope's views and wide ranging travels. The author relates the Pope's trips to South America, Asia, Africa as well as to all-protestant Scandinavia, enthusiastic Lithuania and, last but not least, several visits to America. Some of us distinctly remember his visit to Washington D.C. Admittedly, many of Weigel's cogent comments can be fully understood only with a good deal of background information. We realize that the Pope's travels of 700,000 miles equal 200 trips from Washington to Paris, but it is not easy to appreciate fully the complexity of various vastly different cultures represented by one billion members of the Catholic Church. Time and again we read that the sheer presence of this formidable individual electrifies the immense crowds meeting him. The same appears to be true when single individuals have an opportunity to meet him on a person-to-person basis.

Lastly, much of the narrative is of special interest to clergy. The book is a virtual mine of information and of commentary related to the Pope's extensive writings which bear formal names such as encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, constitutions, and letters. But there is one observation which the author conveys to all of us: that this pontificate is one of the most important in centuries for the Church and the world, and that some may well argue that John Paul II has been the most consequential pope since the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in the 16th century. He has also been the most visible pope ever.

As we enter the new Millennium, we can say that this generation has been blessed by the presence of Pope John II, who is most certainly the most significant personage in Polish history.

George E Suboczewski