

John Paul set to join the ‘blessed’

Beatification thrills many, though some voice doubts



Andreas Widmer of Somerville, 44, is a former Swiss Guard. (Aram Boghosian for The Boston Globe)

By [Lisa Wangsness](#)

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On Christmas Eve 1986, a novice member of the Swiss Guard stood sentry in a dark antechamber outside Pope John Paul II’s private apartment in Vatican City. Andreas Widmer was terribly homesick. Silently, he began to cry.

Just then, a warm light flooded the hallway, and in the doorway stood a figure draped in white. The pope was on his way to Mass.

“He just looked at me and said, ‘This is your first time away from home at Christmas, isn’t it?’ ”

Then he gripped Widmer’s hand, and went on, “ ‘I just want to thank you for your service and the sacrifice you are making tonight. I’m going to pray for you,’ ” Widmer recalled.

Today, Widmer, a 44-year-old Somerville resident and cofounder of a fund to fight global poverty, will be among the 2 million people expected to gather in Rome for a three-day celebration of the beatification of Pope John Paul II. Beatification is the final step before canonization, the designation of sainthood by the Roman Catholic church.

It is a historic moment for the church, and one seen by Catholics in New England through the prism of their relationship with a church that John Paul, as much as anyone in the 20th century, helped shape.

Many cherish him as the pope who sped communism's demise in Eastern Europe, a charismatic figure who appealed to young Catholics and worked to repair fractured relations with Jews. To others, however, he was a disappointment for failing to more fully address sexual abuse by clergy, and for his conservative positions on issues such as birth control and women's ordination.

"If you affirm the [church's] traditional morality, then you are going to say he was a great man; if not, you are going to take issue with him," said the Rev. Harvey Egan, a professor of theology at Boston College.

And yet, Egan said, John Paul managed to win the hearts of many people who disagreed with some of his views. "He came across as a teacher — firm, gentle, loving. . . . Just the pastoral touch that he had, and his life was filled with that."

In Boston, where an estimated 400,000 converged on the Common in October 1979 to watch John Paul celebrate Mass in the driving rain, he remains beloved by many. His name is already attached to Catholic schools in Dorchester and Mattapan, to a park on the Neponset River, to a parish hall at Our Lady of Czestochowa Church, a culturally Polish parish in South Boston.

"He made the papacy so alive," said Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley, the archbishop of Boston, who is attending the beatification ceremonies in Rome. "For many people, the pope had been such a distant and almost unreal figure. He changed all of that."

Beatification declares a holy person "blessed" and allows him to be venerated in places closely connected to his life. The designation requires proof of at least one miracle; John Paul has been credited with the sudden recovery in 2005 of a French nun suffering from Parkinson's disease. Canonization, which requires a second miracle, proclaims the holy person in heaven with God, and worthy of veneration by the worldwide church.

About 75 of the 265 popes in the history of the Catholic Church have been named saints, the vast majority in the church's first millennium of existence, before a formal canonization process was established. Just two popes in the last 500 years have been canonized, said the Rev. Thomas W. Worcester, a historian from the College of the Holy Cross.

This weekend's events in Rome begin tonight, with a prayer vigil in the Circus Maximus. At 4 a.m. Boston time tomorrow, Pope Benedict XVI will celebrate a beatification Mass in St. Peter's Square. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state, will celebrate a Mass of thanksgiving on Monday.

In Boston tomorrow, Our Lady of Czestochowa Church will hold a special Mass, mostly in Polish, for the beatification.

“It’s quite hard to get to Rome, and there will be crowds of people, so many people decided not to go,” said Iwona Gajczak, the parish secretary. “We will pray, and try to at least connect with people who are in Rome.”

The Watertown-based CatholicTV network will rebroadcast the Mass, as well as other programming related to the celebration. And in the Berkshires, the Marians of the Immaculate Conception are expecting 20,000 pilgrims, about 20 percent more than usual, for their annual celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday.

The order, which is originally Polish and has its US headquarters in Stockbridge, will display a photographic exhibit of the late pope, as well as a rosary and zucchetto, or skullcap, that belonged to John Paul.

“He was very close to us,” said Brother Esteban Ybarra, events coordinator for Divine Mercy Sunday for the Marians.

Calls for canonization came immediately after John Paul’s death; mourners in St. Peter’s Square cried: “*Santo subito!*” — “sainthood now.” The Vatican responded by fast-tracking a process that typically takes place long after the death of a candidate for canonization.

“It does seem rushed compared to other beatifications, particularly other beatifications of popes,” Worcester said, noting John Paul beatified two previous popes on the same Sunday in 2000 — John XXIII, and Pius IX.

Worcester said some Vatican observers speculate that Polish members of the church hierarchy who want John Paul to become the patron saint of Poland may be propelling the process — or that there is a sense within the Vatican that beatification could exalt the late pope’s record and perhaps squelch criticism of his handling of the sexual abuse crisis. The celebration also gives the Vatican, which has been dogged by the sexual abuse crisis, the opportunity to showcase something popular and uplifting.

Some Catholics, however, say they would like a fuller accounting of what John Paul knew about clergy sexual abuse and its cover-up during his pontificate. Critics say he ignored allegations of sexual abuse against the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, a Mexican priest who founded the Legionaries of Christ, and who was accused of abusing multiple seminarians and children, including his own. In 2006, Pope Benedict ordered him to a life of prayer and penance.

“He did so little to respond to the complaints of sexual abuse,” said Ron DuBois, 77, of Braintree, a member of the lay group Voice of the Faithful. “Why the rush? To me, that’s the big question.”

But beatification “doesn’t mean a kind of divine stamp of approval is acknowledged on everything he did,” Worcester said.

Raymond L. Flynn, a former mayor of Boston and ambassador to the Vatican from 1993 to 1997, said the pope's health was failing long before the US abuse crisis exploded in 2002. And, he said, even the best leaders can rarely tackle more than one or two major issues at a time.

“The major challenge to the world [then] was communism — the oppression of the church, the oppression of people, the diminution of the value of the human person,” he said. “He took that one on.”

Flynn remembers vividly the scene in South Boston the night John Paul was elected pope. The streets were “absolutely mobbed,” he said, as the Polish community in the neighborhood — now largely dispersed to the suburbs — poured into the streets in exultation.

The next year, the new pope returned to his homeland for the first time. Andrzej Pronczuk, then a young professor in Warsaw, stood in wonderment among the thousands who lined the road from the airport to the city center cheering, tossing flowers, and waving Vatican flags.

“Myself, my parents, my friends, we were all thinking the same way, that the communists — it was finished for them,” said Pronczuk, who lives in Milton and works at Brandeis University. “This was a big boost of spirit, a big boost of strength, of unity, in the country. . . . It was like a beacon of hope in dark times.”

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