

Pope John Paul II Dies

The Christian world was shocked to hear the passing away of Pope John Paul II in the Vatican on April 2, 2005. This brought to an end the third longest papacy in history. Hundreds of churches in the Italian capital began ringing the death-knell upon hearing the news of the death of Pope John Paul II.

Pope John Paul was known to be a champion of the poor and the down-trodden. He used his office to draw people's attention to the plight of the world's neediest and most oppressed masses. All the while he continued to keep his firm and corrective grip on this church.

During his long tenure of 26 years, Pope John Paul canonized 482 saints and beatified 1338 people, more than all of his predecessors during the last four centuries. He held 1, 1161 general audiences at the Vatican which were attended by about 8 million people. He was known to be a strong defender of human rights and religious freedom. He once said, "I speak in the name of those who have no voice."

Pope John Paul was born on May 18, 1920 in Wadowice, a small township near Krakow in Poland. His father was a non-commissioned officer in the army. His mother died when he was only eight. A student of philosophy and literature at the university of Krakow, he was ordained after he completed his education in the year 1946 when he became Poland's youngest bishop at the age of 35.

He later became the Archbishop of Krakow in 1964. Fifteen years later, on October 16, 1978, he was elected the first non-Italian Pope in 455 years. He has been popular with the Christian masses ever since he took over. A special lover of soccer, he had travelled a total of 1,247,613 km, or 3.24 times the distance from Earth to the Moon. He loved mountaineering and was fond of the hills.

As a thinker and a philosopher, he was a true humanist to the core. He said that the greatest danger to the world was not from communism or capitalism but from those who were moving away from God and religion. He was a practical man who believed in doing things. In 1983, he met and forgave one Mehmet Ali Agca who had shot at and nearly killed him in 1981.

The next Pope to occupy this coveted seat at the Vatican was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, a German. Mr. Ratzinger, 78, the church's 256th pontiff, took the

name of Benedict XVI. The new Pope, born on April 16, 1927, was a leading professor of theology and the archbishop of Munich before taking over the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in 1981. In his maiden appearance at the balcony of St. Peter's Vatican after his election, he addressed the crowd in the Square and said: "I entrust myself to our prayers."