

This Thursday marks the 25th anniversary of the election of Pope John Paul II. Of the 263 successors to St. Peter, only two have served longer. Polish by birth, John Paul is the first non-Italian pope since Adrian VI from the Netherlands in 1552.

In the late 20th century, John XXIII and Paul VI presided over the Second Vatican Council. The next pope named himself after both predecessors. John Paul I lit up the world with his smile, but he died after one month in office, like a meteor in the night. Karol Wojtyla succeeded him and took the name John Paul II.

His accomplishments are many. He survived an assassination attempt and forgave his assailant. He revised the Code of Canon Law, the catechism of the Catholic Church and the texts for mass. He has visited 129 countries. He helped bring down communism. He criticized society's "culture of death" and defended human life. He has canonized over 470 new saints and beatified over 1300 people. That's more than any other pope in history has done, and more than all other popes combined. Worldwide the number of Catholics has jumped 40% during his pontificate. We now number over 1 billion.

There have been disappointments. The liturgical and ecumenical renewals begun by Vatican II have stalled. The millennium celebration did not remove penalties from remarried Catholics as many had hoped. Good theologians were too publicly called on the carpet. The sex abuse scandals tarnished the church. Worldwide we went from 1800 Catholics per priest to 2600. Still, this papacy has accomplished much.

Today's first reading praises the gift of wisdom. We obtain wisdom through prayer. Gold and silver, health and beauty are nothing compared to wisdom. Good people will give up sleep and daytime hours in pursuit of wisdom.

John Paul II challenges us to think of what is important in life: not riches, health or beauty, but human life in all its forms. In 1979 at Yankee Stadium he said, "You must never be content to leave [the poor] just the crumbs from the feast. You must take of your substance, and not just of your abundance, in order to help them." John Paul has not asked, "What do you want to do?" "Where do you want to go?" or "What do you want to buy?" He has asked "Who are you?" and "What are your responsibilities?" When we attain that wisdom, we obtain the riches of a meaningful life.