

(April 6, 2005) Congressman Lipinski Speaks About Pope John Paul II

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Pope John Paul II was a remarkable leader, whose intense spirituality, intellectual brilliance, and sheer physical stamina are beyond dispute. He has been an inspiration to me and to millions of people, and his leadership has brought people of all faiths closer together.

John Paul II was a beacon of freedom and gave voice to those who could not speak, especially to those who were oppressed by the brutality of communism. In public pronouncements during his visits to Poland and at every possible opportunity, he bore a simple message: faith matters, truth matters, freedom matters, and injustice must be condemned.

He encouraged such dissidents as Poland's Lech Walesa and Czechoslovakia's Vaclav Havel to live "as if" they were free, undermining the elaborate system of lies that the communist system depended upon to survive. Once pretenses were stripped away, more and more people realized they were not alone. It was Pope John Paul II's courage and decisive actions that nurtured Poland's Solidarity movement, and served as a catalyst to the peaceful liberation of Poland and the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Pope John Paul II was the first pope to truly take the papacy outside of the Vatican and deliver his spiritual message all across the globe. He visited Africa four times, Latin America five, managing altogether an astounding 104 pilgrimages to 129 countries around the globe. I had the privilege of seeing Pope John Paul II twice, once in 1979 at a Mass at Five Holy Martyrs Parish in Chicago, and once at a Mass at the Vatican on Christmas Eve. I am but one of millions of people worldwide who were moved by the personal experience of his charisma and the truth that he spoke.

Pope John Paul II broke precedent after precedent in reaching out to those of other faiths. He was the first pope since St. Peter to visit a synagogue, the first to visit a mosque, and, in an extraordinary illustration of his respect for other faiths, he issued a series of papal apologies for the Catholic church's past treatment of Jews, for the Crusades and for the Church's role in the post-Reformation wars of religion.

While some people view the Pope's statements and actions as representing an inconsistent political ideology, the truth is that everything that John Paul II did arose from one inviolable principle - every individual has dignity and society must constantly strive to uphold that dignity and promote a "culture of life."

I join my fellow Catholics and people everywhere in mourning the passing of the Holy Father. Pope John Paul II led a remarkable and blessed life, altering history and making the world a better place. But even with his death, there are still millions who, having been inspired by his life, will continue to strive to carry on his good work. This is a true testament to one of the greatest figures of the 20th century.