

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

How John Paul Became The Vatican's Master of Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Whether by divine providence or a quirk of fate, the most charismatic Pope ever, who was made for television, came along just at the right time, when technology would finally make him available to all of the people all of the time.

Worldwide media coverage of the latter has eclipsed every major news event in sheer visibility in recent memory, according to Global Language Monitor, including 9/11, the South Asian Tsunami, and the deaths of Ronald Reagan and Princess Di. And more people converged on the Vatican to mourn this Pope than any other in history.

But in 1978, when news reporters at the Vatican were informed that Karol Wojtyla of Poland had been elected Pope, they looked at each other in astonishment, I was told by former CBS News Rome correspondent Bert Quint. He said the new Pope "was on nobody's list."

But one of Quint's colleagues, Winston Burdett, who had covered the Vatican for CBS News decades, immediately grasped the importance of the announcement. Co-anchoring coverage on CBS Radio, Burdett said the choice of Wojtla was extraordinary, historic and of singular importance.

Back then, CNN was not on the scene to carry the story around the world, because CNN would not even exist for another two years. ABC, CBS and NBC were just beginning to abandon the use of telephone lines to send their programs domestically by satellite. In our newsroom at the NBC TV station in Chicago, more technologically advanced than most, we were still batting out copy on Royal manual typewriters. Photographers had to lug heavy early-issue video cameras with big cassettes and audio recorders.

But at a 1978 electronics trade show in Oklahoma City, there was a glimpse of what was to come, from engineers designing the first three-meter home TV dish and receiver. Historians looking back over the decades now write that they had a hunch their gear would someday be used all over the place.

Associated Press TV, Reuters TV, and other satellite news distributors, who today transmit stories to their television newsroom clients globally and instantaneously, did not exist back then. There was no Internet, no international public electronic fax.

So how did the Pope proceed with the emerging technologies, and grow with them, and be such a great communicator? The answer, from several people I talked to who would know, is that the Pope did it simply by being himself, and this came through all the new gadgets. What the media saw, they liked, and so did the people who watched.

One of John Paul's first audiences was with journalists who accompanied him on his first trip to his native Poland, where the church was having a tense relationship with the Communist

government. Bert Quint was one of the reporters accompanying the Pope.

“John Paul came out of his private quarters on the plane,” said Quint, “and walked along the narrow aisle past the journalists and he took questions, and spoke in several languages. Popes don’t really have to mingle, but he did with us, not to win good will, but as a gesture of natural friendliness. I asked him how he felt about going to Poland at this difficult time. He put hands on my shoulders and said, looking into my eyes, ‘I am doing what I ask others. I try to control my emotions and not be afraid.’ His hands on my shoulders was real. He was nervous.”

Quint said that after each long international trip, the Pope would send a personal note to the families of those who traveled with him to cover the story, apologizing for the time their loved one had to be away.

The Pope felt comfortable on television. “He knew how to work the cameras, and had a sense of the photo op (opportunity),” said former CBS News correspondent Ike Pappas. “He went skiing in the Alps. A Pope! He was well aware that we would reflect his image.”

Pappas said he was standing in a press line at the Vatican with Mario Biasetti, a CBS News cameraman who knew the Pope personally.

“The Pope spotted him, flung his arms in the air and shouted ‘Mario,’ and he walked over and gave Mario a big hug,” said Pappas.

Both Pope John Paul and President Reagan were called a “great communicator.” Leonard Baldyga, former Minister Counselor of the U.S. Information Service in Rome, points out that both “were trained in the theater and/or film and were masters of the craft. Whereas Reagan followed a long line of great broadcast communicators starting with FDR, the Pope was the first head of the Vatican to embrace TV and radio.”

Joe Johnson, who was an assistant U.S. press attaché in Rome, recalled the Pope’s dramatic flair was a novelty that won him greater attention than one might expect. Johnson noted that both Reagan and John Paul also had the ability to frame political and moral issues for huge gatherings of people, a talent that made them great communicators.

Even when the Pope became ill late in his life and could not speak well, he was able to be effective on television by the use of his body language and facial expressions.

But before his lingering illness, the Pope was the Vatican’s rock star. Michael Canning, a former USIA Press/Information Officer in Rome, said he once saw the Pope “cruise down a stanchion rope of star-struck Italians after delivering a mass, blessing each of them with softest Italian and making comments about their little kids in dulcet Italian. Had ‘em eatin’ outa his hand, baby.”
