

The next pope

Vatican watcher and prominent journalist John Wilkins says Pope John Paul II will be a hard act to follow

by Joseph Sinasac

Joseph Sinasac is publisher and editor of The Catholic Register, a national weekly newspaper based in Toronto. He is also a member of the Board of Governors of St. Jerome's University.

John Wilkins takes pains to point out that he is not a cardinal, or a priest, or a church historian, or a theologian. All, of course, would be eminently suited to give the annual Devlin Lecture, which closed the 1999–2000 lecture series sponsored by the St. Jerome's Centre for Catholic Experience.

But Wilkins is just a journalist. In his native England, journalists are, he said, "a profession ranked low in public esteem, below even politicians, about on a par with real estate agents." Not all journalists, however. And certainly not Wilkins, who occupies a rare niche in his field. He is a Catholic journalist. Moreover, he is editor of one of the English-speaking world's most prestigious Catholic publications, *The Tablet*.

As editor since 1982, he has been an ardent observer of the Vatican, and its most prominent resident, Pope John Paul II. It was this pope and his possible successor that formed the theme for the year 2000 Devlin Lecture April 7 in Siegfried Hall.

"When John Paul II dies, there will be a global outpouring of admiration and love," the slight and greying journalist told more than 100 people gathered to hear his talk, *The Next Pope*. "With the heart of a lion, and still some remnants of the strength of an ox, Pope John Paul II continues to dominate his Church even now. He has been pope for 22 years. It will be a very hard act to follow."

Over the hour-long talk, Wilkins elegantly examined that "hard act." And he went on to explore the potential attributes of a successor. For that task, Wilkins is well suited. He is far from a disinterested observer, as journalists are traditionally expected to be. As a Catholic journalist, he professes the same creed as all Catholics. As a convert to Catholicism years ago, he still retains the convert's enthusiasm for his adopted faith. And as a senior and concerned member of his church, he has taken more than usual interest in the leadership of more than one billion Catholics worldwide.

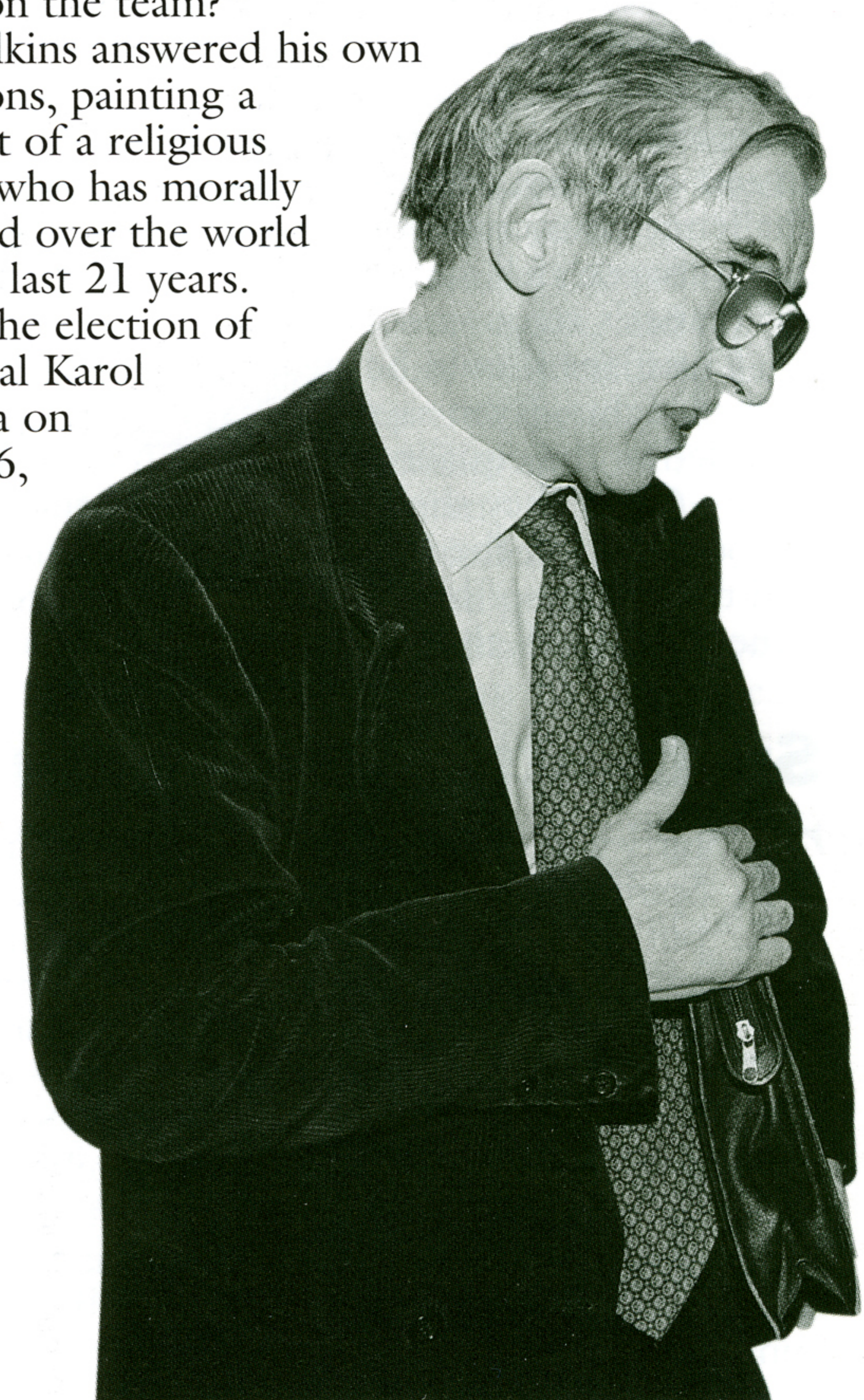
In *Understanding Veritatis Splendor*, Wilkins has edited and co-written a book on what he calls Pope John Paul's "most important encyclical." And he has been at every synod of bishops in

Rome in the last two decades. Over the years he has interviewed a small army of bishops, cardinals and officials of the Curia, the Holy See's circumspect civil service. Today, he is considered a leading commentator in Britain on Catholicism, earning a Member of the British Empire for his contributions to Catholic journalism and intellectual life. Besides his career at *The Tablet*, he spent years with the BBC as a producer and writer, and a year as visiting scholar at Clare College, Cambridge, his alma mater.

Wilkins' years of observation have given him an intense admiration for Pope John Paul, whose major accomplishments he described in detail. At the same time, he has come to believe that the way this papacy has evolved demands a new pope who will take the church in a very different direction.

"We have had a super-pope. Do we want another one?" he asks. "We have had a centralizer. Do we want another one? Where should the emphasis lie between the captain and the team? Should it be again on the captain, or this time more on the team?"

Wilkins answered his own questions, painting a portrait of a religious leader who has morally towered over the world for the last 21 years. Since the election of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla on Oct. 16, 1978, the



John Wilkins (left), editor of The Tablet, and Joe Sinasac (right), editor of The Catholic Register, share a keen interest in the papacy.