

current Holy Father has travelled more, written more and addressed more people than any other pope in history.

This is the pope who has done much to overcome 2,000 years of Christian animosity toward Jews. Several times in his pontificate, Pope John Paul has made gestures to embrace Jews.

The most recent was his March trip to the ancient Holy Land, where, in a profound act of repentance, he placed a written prayer in a crevice in the Western Wall of Jerusalem, one of Judaism's holiest sites. This prayer was the same used at a public act of repentance led by Pope John Paul on the doorstep of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on March 12—another act greeted with much misgiving among some cardinals, Wilkins said.

Yet even as most Jewish leaders were praising his actions, Pope John Paul did not fail to stand in solidarity with Palestinians. "He had no hesitation in raising the treatment of the Palestinians by the Israelis and his language was uncompromising," Wilkins added. The Pope, in his visit to the Palestinian refugee camp of Deheisha, near Bethlehem, called for a "just solution" to the ills he saw all around him—a severe lack of basic health care, housing, education and work. And not just that, but also freedom, relatives close by, familiar surroundings and the cultural traditions that nourish family and personal life. Wilkins also revisited the familiar ground of the Pope's Polishness and the now widely accepted belief that John Paul was the single most influential figure in the downfall of communism. He talked about John Paul's ability to be the boy who pointed out that the emperor—in this case the tired communist regime in Poland—had no clothes.

"Every pundit in my country was saying, when an empire starts to fall, that's when it's really dangerous—that's when the bombs might go off.

In fact the Soviet giant simply faded away with hardly a shot fired. The point is that power isn't something you own, like a book or a car. It depends on belief. In Poland, John Paul II removed that belief. If you want to look for a

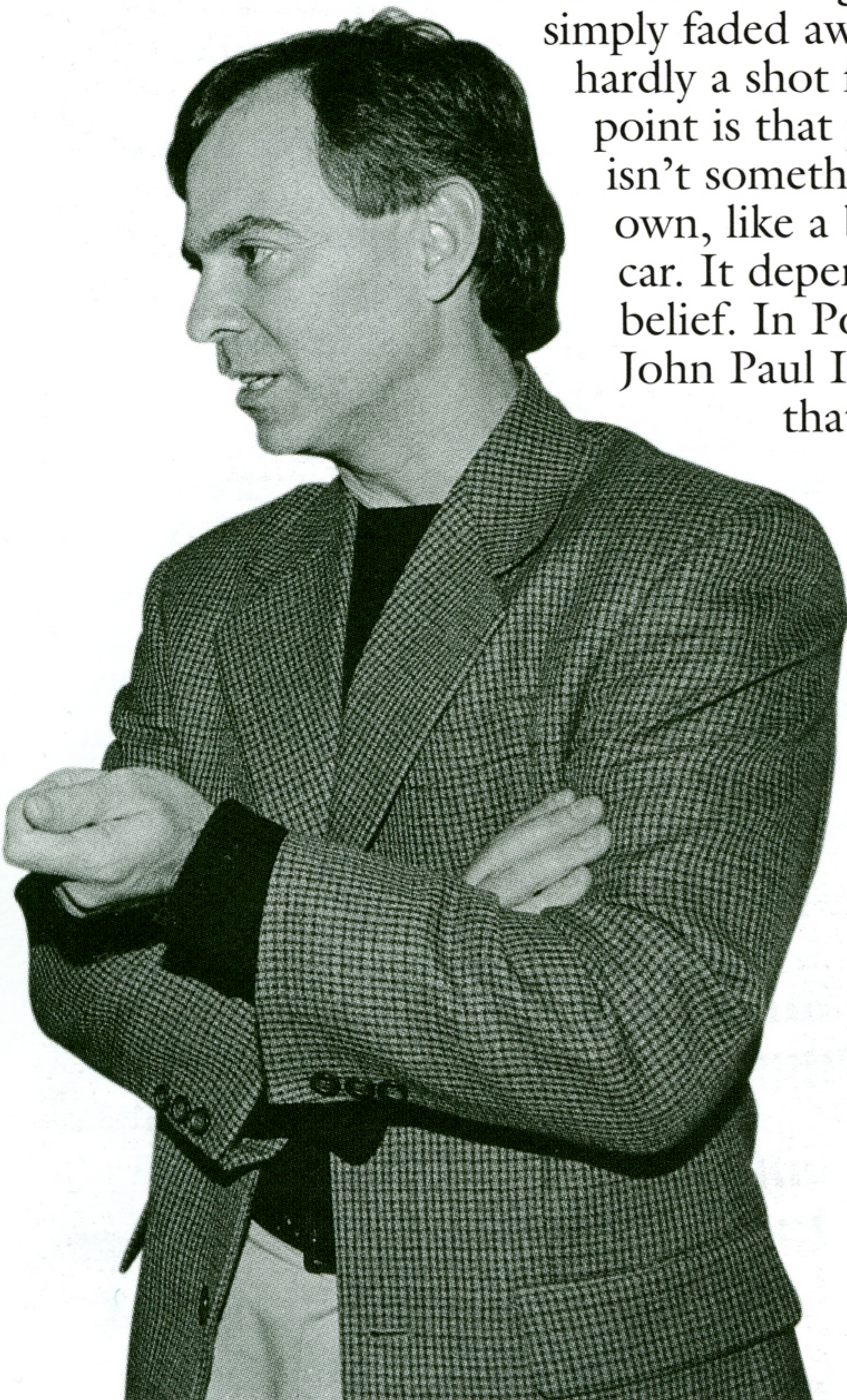


Photo: Ron Hewson

providential reason for this papacy, you do not have to look further than this," Wilkins argued.

Wilkins also admired the pope's great courage and determination to stand up to the excesses of Western society, its rampant consumerism, individualism and relativism. "The pope is respected in the West as a huge moral authority—the greatest critic of global capitalism.... He is praised for his firm stance. People like to know where the anchor is. But then they go off and do what they were doing before. He himself knows it. 'I have sounded the trumpet,' he once said to a friend. 'Why have they not followed?'"

The answer to that question, Wilkins explained, lies in the failures of this pontificate. The decline in church attendance and religious vocations in the industrialized world, particularly Europe, Wilkins blamed on a church that has become centralized under a Vatican that has little understanding of the diverse needs of Catholics around the world. And, he added, ecumenical progress has stalled, perhaps because other Christian denominations are frightened by such a powerful figure who commands global attention when he talks.


"Could it be that we have now a reformed Catholic Church but an unreformed papacy?" he asked.

Drawing on John Paul's own 1995 encyclical, *On Christian Unity*, Wilkins reminded his listeners that the pope had invited a dialogue among all Christians on how the papacy might be changed. "It was necessary," the pope said, "to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation."

With that lead, Wilkins laid out a prescription for reform that he suggested a new pope might follow. This formula included reducing the power of the curia, and reforming synods of bishops so that they govern more in partnership with the pope.

But does anyone in the College of Cardinals want the same thing? Wilkins argued that some of the cardinals who will elect the next pope will be looking for a person who will be dramatically different from Pope John Paul. This person will not necessarily be "progressive" or "conservative." Instead, he speculated, there will be a compromise, likely an Italian since many cardinals would be comfortable with going back to Italy for a pope. If not an Italian, then a European archbishop, and then perhaps a Latin American.

Still, picking popes is a dangerous business for outsiders. "I have been told that the press corps gathered in Rome after the unexpected death of John Paul I, who had reigned for only 33 days, prepared a pile of buttons, each bearing the name of a cardinal in the conclave," he related. "Then they divided the heap into probables (a few), possibles (a few more) and no-hopers (the majority). By universal agreement, Karol Wojtyla was placed among the no-hopers."

At the next papal enclave in the Vatican, regardless of who appears at the loggia overlooking St. Peter's Square wearing the white robes of the papacy, Wilkins plans to be there, taking notes. He is, after all, just a journalist. 

Centre lectures for the winter term

The 2001 season of the St. Jerome's Centre for Catholic Experience brings four "hope-filled" speakers to Siegfried Hall. Lectures, which are free and open to all, take place at 7:30 p.m.

When Worlds Collide: Faith vs. Popular Culture

January 19

Kathy Shaidle, poet and columnist, tackles the clash between Christianity and mainstream art.

One God/Many Stories

February 9

Sister Eva Solomon, C.S.J., an Anishinabe spiritual leader, talks of how the "God-stories" of different cultures can be integrated in one faith journey.

Christianity and the Family: Ancient Challenge, Modern Crisis

March 9

Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether debunks the "norm" of the modern nuclear family and argues for a more inclusive view.

The Incarnation: Challenges for Sexuality and Spirituality

March 30

Cristina Vanin, St. Jerome's chair of Religious Studies,

explores the relationship between sexuality and spirituality in the light of the Incarnation.

