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Senate

Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein

“The Life of Pope John Paul II”

MRS FEINSTEIN: Mr. President, on Saturday evening the world lost a voice for peace, justice and human dignity.

Born in Poland in 1920, Pope John Paul II grew up in the aftermath of World War I. As a young man, he witnessed the injustice of the Nazi occupation of his country, lived amid the horrendous crimes of the Holocaust and survived decades of repression behind the Iron Curtain.

Out of those experiences, he developed a hopeful view of the world that defined his 26 years as the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. And he shared that vision with Catholics and non-Catholics worldwide.

As the first non-Italian Pope since 1523, Pope John Paul II was a truly groundbreaking figure. He redefined the papacy, coming out from behind the walls of the Vatican to travel to 129 countries and literally reach out to people wherever he went.

Through his travel – more than any other Pope – he helped rejuvenate and expand Catholicism to areas far beyond its roots. During his 26 years as Pope, the Catholic Church grew from 750 million people to over 1 billion, with most of that growth coming from the third world.

For those in developing countries who struggled merely to survive, the Pope was a strong advocate for economic justice. And for those who lived under repression, he was a powerful voice for freedom.

His 1979 visit to his native Poland is viewed as the spark that ignited the labor movement which toppled communism in Poland and led to its demise throughout Eastern Europe a decade later.

It was his powerful yet simple belief in the value of human life that brought him to challenge violence wherever he saw it.

He chastised the brutal Communist governments of Eastern Europe. He criticized the military junta that governed Brazil in the early 1980s. He condemned nuclear war while meeting with survivors of the Hiroshima bombing. He called for an end to the violence in Northern Ireland. And he appealed for human rights in Cuba. The Pope consistently urged leaders and citizens alike to seek peace and respect human life.

The Pope also sought to heal wounds. He apologized for the errors of Catholics over the last 2,000 years and for injustices against Jews, women, indigenous peoples, immigrants, and the poor. He acknowledged the failure of many Catholics to help Jews during the Holocaust. And more recently, he condemned the sexual abuse of children by priests in the United States.

The Pope reached out to members of other faiths at a time of growing sectarian violence and religious strife. He was the first Pope to pray in a synagogue, the first to visit Auschwitz, and the first to make an official papal visit to the Holy Land – John Paul II made great strides in

improving relations between Catholics and Jews.

And just as he acknowledged the mistakes made by his Church and its members, he also demonstrated a willingness to forgive those who had done harm to him.

In December 1983, he met with the man who had attempted to assassinate him two and a half years earlier. During that meeting, the Pope forgave the man who had shot him three times.

The Pope regularly visited the United States and met with five presidents. He believed that the U.S. had a special responsibility to the world calling on our Nation to be, “for the world, an example of a genuinely free, democratic, just and humane society.”

In recent years, even as his health deteriorated, he refused to give up. And in this, he served as a model to millions of people throughout the world about how faith and willpower can overcome adversity.

Indeed, I cannot remember a Pope who has been more warmly received and loved. I had the great honor to meet him at the Vatican in 1982 where I presented him with a cross sculpted from handguns melted down after being turned into police when they were banned in San Francisco. He received my gift warmly, giving me a rosary in return.

The world has lost a strong voice for peace, justice, and human dignity. Pope John Paul II will be dearly missed.