When Cardinal Wojtyla appeared on the balcony of St Peter’s 25 years ago, could anyone have imagined what this pope from a “distant land” would accomplish? When Time Magazine (1994/95) chose Pope John Paul II as Man of the Year, Time journalists observed that the Pope used well and often the world’s bully-est pulpit to make the world listen to his message. This pulpit was on the world stage through his international visits. While he was not the first pope to venture outside the Vatican walls to other parts of the world, John Paul II used the papal visit format to engage his audiences in shaping an understanding of the sacred. He developed a new papal vocabulary of the sacred.
To illustrate this new form of communication, I have chosen three attributes of the papal international visits to examine: massive, mystical and compassionate.

1. Why do I choose the word massive? Pope John Paul II’s international visits are part of a global strategy to portray the church as everywhere throughout a culturally diverse world. With four trips a year carefully scheduled so as not to favor one geographic area or cultural group, the pope sustained his image with the help of the media as a world-embracing figure. Papal visits are most often planned as national events, and to achieve this purpose, the Vatican relies on national bishops’ conferences to plan itineraries and themes. With networks fanning out into all parts of the country and into different service areas of the church as an institution, church members develop a national consciousness of the visit. Many who participate in the papal visit begin to think of themselves not only in terms of their membership in a local parish or local school, but as “insiders” of a much larger church negotiating with others a common understanding of their faith, its problems and solutions. Perhaps some of you in this audience had the opportunity of attending a papal event during one of his visits to the U.S. If so, you and I joined the ranks of Catholics who when awarded tickets viewed our chosen participation as a visible sign that we belong to the church; we boasted about our inclusion, told tales about the event to friends and, if lucky enough to have a photo with the pope, we display it prominently in our homes and offices. The participation in papal visits develops a sense of unified effort that is larger than their normal frame of reference, making the church more viable as a national and worldwide entity.
One characteristic of these nationally planned visits is that local and Vatican planners set their priorities on creating images of massivity. Local planners examine the strengths and weakness of the local church institution and make site and setting decisions based on potential success rates. After some discussion on the political ramifications, Miami was finally selected as the first stop on the 1987 U.S. visit because the Latin population would guarantee enthusiastic and emotional crowds. The main event of each day is the celebration of the Eucharist. Organized in stadiums, open fields, and public grounds, these Eucharistic celebrations place emphasis on crowds, following John Paul II’s preference for large-scale events. The masses are sympathetic to John Paul II, but in some intellectual circles this preference for crowds is criticized. The intellectuals prefer small meetings of elites to reflect deeply on issues, but the pope wants to touch and inspire as many people as possible. As an evangelizer, the Pope is compelled to continue the expansion of the church. The interaction of pope and large numbers becomes a crucial element in establishing and sustaining what Peter Berger (1969) observed was the durability and plausibility of the church.

There is a close relationship between the visit’s emphasis on crowded events and the media. Large-scale events generate interest on the part of the media, but small, elite meetings are closed to the public and the media. The mass media thrives on action and the numbers of people attending the large-scale events add to the dramatic action of the visit, thus guaranteeing media attention. Even this week, during the official 25th anniversary, we saw the enormous crowds and media attention.

The emphasis on massive events whether in Rome or in other parts of the world demands that the church employ people who are well versed in the technologies of media production. In this papacy, the Vatican has vastly improved its technological capabilities. In Rome you will find huge television screens placed at strategic locations in the streets leading to St. Peter’s in order to accommodate the crowds that will no longer fit into St.
Peter’s square. The communication systems have become much more sophisticated. During the Jubilee year, Vatican radio created extraordinary programs, some involving teams of multilingual moderators and guests so that messages were not translated, but discussed in many different languages on the same program.

The crowded rituals also tend to increase the intensity of the event. The papal visit, like the parish mission, is planned in advance to motivate and excite the members of the church to prepare for this unusual opportunity. Like parishioners being readied for a spiritual journey, church members at the site of the visit, anticipate being persuaded. In a sense, they become malleable because they expect something extraordinary to happen to them. Planners for the World Youth Day during the millennium 2000 celebration suggested locating the youth at several different Roman sites to be reached by helicopter by the pope. John Paul II found this suggestion unacceptable, preferring one and only one site for the massive crowd. When people enter a crowded event to wait for the arrival of the pope, they have an immediate and direct awareness of a reality sustained by the thousands and sometimes hundreds of thousands of people who gather to see the pope and be part of a demonstration of their faith. As the pope passes through the crowd, some persons, moved to tears by their excitement, ignite the emotions of those seated nearby. This stirring embrace of John Paul II is infectious, and the response to the pope moves from a conglomeration of individual reactions isolated from each other to a unified movement of animation and joy. So connected to this “all” of those present, the audience begins to create meaning in the “we” of the church. United with the pope and everyone assembled, people find it easy to believe the myth of oneness and universality of a diverse and world-wide church when it is experienced as real in such massive doses.

Although not all the coverage is accurate or cast in a positive framework, the unusual amount of news coverage given to Catholicism and the pope during these visits gives the church an enormous legitimacy as an important referent in the construction of
meaning. The possibility to reach many more people through the mass media is 
enhanced through the visits because John Paul II, no longer distant and hidden behind the 
Vatican walls, makes himself visible and encourages others to manifest themselves as 
visible members of the church. He and members of the local church externalize 
sacredness in contrast to the modern tendency to interiorize spiritual dimensions of one’s 
identity. The television cameras increase the memorability of this externalization.

2. The second attribute is the mystical. I have often heard members of the 
Catholic Church complain that the liturgical reforms of Vatican Council II caused us to 
lose touch with the mystical elements of our faith. John Paul II’s uses the papal 
international visit as a means of restoring a mystical quality to the church’s sacred 
symbol system. The majestic and awesome character of the papal visit lends itself to the 
kind of mythmaking that lifts people’s spirits and provides relief from the insoluble 
problems of their human and earthly dimension. The media, particularly television, 
contribute significantly to the dramatic unfolding of the papal visit. Like no other 
celebrity, the pope is treated as a larger-than-life mysterious hero. This media coverage 
of the pope is not unrelated to the visit’s planning and performance. The pope arrives but 
gives no press conferences or personal interviews. He is present and compelling to the 
media, but he remains aloof. Since the pope does not “tell all” to the press, they must 
interpret what they receive from other sources. This sense of mystery titillates viewers 
and readers and as Duncan (1962) tells us, the excitement of bridging the mysterious gap 
motivates people toward greater union.

As mentioned previously, in the churches and through the media, people 
anticipate being persuaded during these papal visits. With color, form, and pageantry, 
these ritual events provide a near perfect rendering of the vertical or transcendent 
dimension of the sacred that is rarely seen in modern parish church settings. To be sacred 
in a modern world, religious symbols must compete with a multitude of images. The
pope, his Vatican liturgists, and the receiving church must make the ritual extraordinary, wrapping the ceremony in the very best that humans can offer. Catholics present in the transformed stadiums and fields are led into an almost surreal world through audio and visual sensations of an ordered and dignified beauty. When the church is presented in its finest attire, its members are absorbed and exhilarated by being a part of a church that produces such magnificent pageantry. Being the object of the crowd’s attention, the Pope transcends his nature as an individual and becomes more “the pope” as a symbol of fixed order. In the face of a fragmented and disorderly world, people flocking to the stadiums for the pope’s Mass crave order but not rational propositions. They go to receive signs and signals that are outside of their ordinary worlds of experience. The ascending movement to a high altar, the slow majestic rhythm and the distinguishing colors of priestly participants arranged in hierarchical order are designed to place distance between the ordinary and the extraordinary. For a society whose culture is immersed in democratic equality, these signs are very far from the everyday contemporary life. Those who were there will boast to their neighbors, friends, and work mates of their presence at this historic moment. The event is extraordinary; they too are extraordinary.

3. Of course we cannot imagine the sacred without reference to compassion and love. Many studies have pointed to the consequences of modern culture’s emphasis on self-fulfillment and self-expression. Alone and frightened, we look for comfort and warmth from their religious institutions. The majestic aura and pageantry of the papal visit with its massive crowds and public celebrity style staging would appear to thwart rather than encourage an intimate loving relationship. For this reason, in contrast to the grand scale of the ceremony, John Paul II employs strategies to communicate the intimate, warm and compassionate fabric of a Christian community. Looking back on the papal visit, what do we remember? Most of us remember those few intense moments when John Paul II dramatized publicly his messages of love and compassion. When he
hugged the baby with AIDS or softly touched an elderly patient, John Paul II shed his papal mantle, emptying himself before the world so as to become more welcoming of all who are ill, troubled, and lonely.

To express this personal warmth and compassion, the communicator has to reveal the self. In this regard, it is important to view John Paul II’s communicative style within a papal rhetorical tradition to understand fully the implications of papal self-revelation in public. Those Catholics who remember the pronouncements of Pope Pius XII recall a highly impersonal mode of speaking. The calling to the papacy was a renunciation of selfhood, and thereafter the pope spoke as a corporate head, never as an individual. The form “we” was the preferred mode to demonstrate that popes did not make individual decisions but spoke as successors of Peter, inspired by the sacred, conveying the authority of a position directly traceable through nearly two thousand years.

Even Pope Paul VI, who simplified many aspects of papal dress and ceremony, continued the formal speaking style of popes using the papal “we.” For example, in attempting to relate more closely to an audience of journalists, Paul VI spoke about his own family, “Our father, Giorgio Montini, to whom We owe Our natural life and so very much of Our spiritual life, was, among other things, a journalist” (Morley, 1968, p. 29). Personal revelation made papal speech very cumbersome until John Paul I, during his short pontificate, inserted the use of “I” in his speeches. From his first words on the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica in 1978, John Paul II followed his predecessor’s lead. He not only used “I” but humbly asked forgiveness for his mistakes in speaking Italian. This change in style was indicative of deep changes in the culture. In a pluralistic world, the “we” of the corporate church no longer had the same strength or meaning. To be connected and relevant to human present activity and understanding, the “we” needed to relate to the age of individual self-fulfillment. By revealing his individual self, John Paul
II provides the missing ingredient needed to intensify the social bonds between the “we” of the corporate church and the “I” of our modern self.

Perhaps the best examples of Pope John Paul II revealing his selfhood occur when he addresses young audiences. Youth culture has been known for its assault on societal structures. Anxious to experiment, young people test the limits, leaping over the boundary lines to experience the thrill of unstructured living. John Paul II enters into his young audience’s play, occasionally delighting them by partaking of their taboo-breaking activities, such as trying on hats and joining in their chants.

Unmasking the self becomes more dramatic when the layers of the mask are thick and weighty. Such is the case for a pope whose role has been formed in a two thousand year tradition. It is striking when John Paul II sprinkles his speech with narrative about his life and experiences before his elevation to the papacy. In his speech to the youth in Los Angeles, he referred to his early days as a young priest talking with students on university campuses or while hiking along lakes or in the mountains. In this same speech to the youth, John Paul II (1994) continued the narrative, revealing his personal habits as a pontiff by saying, “Even now as Pope, during the summer months, various groups of young people come to Castelgandolfo for an evening and we sing and talk together” (pp.251-252).

In revealing himself to his young audiences, John Paul II becomes more of an equal with his audience, acting as a counterweight against the power of authority. The singing, the conversational talking, and the hiking with young people affect human relationships because, according to Duncan (1962), in such joy and gaiety “new energy” is given to “our social bonds” (pp. 337-338). Rhetorically, his dismissal of his pontiff-ness breaks down barriers that may exist because of his high office. John Paul II has had the courage to reveal self even under unfavorable circumstances. Remember the photos of the pope in the hospital after the attempted assassination. And today the pope in his
frail and ailing state remains accessible to the public and the media. He is not afraid to have people see him infirm and weak.

One of Pope John Paul II’s accomplishments was to create a new form of papal communication. I have outlined three attributes of his new communicative form: massive, mystical and compassionate. The papal visit serves to emphasize the massive global reach of the church. Its mystical form of pageantry conveys the extraordinary sacred otherness of the church and papacy. And finally moments of human compassion help create plausible portraits of the sacred. Among today’s audiences who long for some meaningful relationships, a celebrity pope who jumps off a stage to touch and connect with his audience as he did when he hugged a young disabled musician dramatically gave life an all powerful, loving God. Whether these are moments only, or whether the visit has long-term effects are questions that will need to be studied in successive papacies. For now, the papal visit has become a new form of papal communication that is compatible with today’s prevalent view of the nature of communication engaging audiences on many levels: through appeal to intellect, imagination, emotion, and common sense experience.


