CENTER VALLEY – His hand trembles beyond control. His knees fail to support him. His voice emits only slurred speech. Ever more frail, at times rather pale, it seems the man cannot go on.

Yet he does. And this week, John Paul II celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of his election to the papacy, an historic moment in that only three others in history have served in this role longer than he.

What he celebrates, however, is not simply his own longevity. Considering he has created all but five of the present College of Cardinals, and has appointed the vast majority of the world’s bishops, the stamp of this pontificate will mark the Church’s governance for several more generations.

Nor is this a silver celebration merely a festive occasion for the Catholic Church. One need only recall the decisive role he played in the downfall of communism or consider that he has met over 900 times with prime ministers or heads of state, to see this pope’s profound impact on the wider world. Whether in Rome (where he has encountered roughly 17 million people), or in any of the 129 different nations he has visited, this pope has touched more lives than any person on the planet.

Having met him, having studied his work, and having taught about his theological vision, I submit that the distinguishing character of his long mission lies in what may be called his “dramatic determination.” From his first words after being elected pope, spoken in fluent Italian, to his diverse symbolic acts, like kissing the ground of a foreign country in which he arrives for the first time, John Paul II has, in a unique and personal way, made all the world his stage.
Earlier in his life, Karol Wojtyla wrote plays for a Polish troupe, whose performances the Nazi occupation forced underground. Later, his dramatic thought came into more public view in *The Acting Person*, a philosophical treatise in which he argues persuasively that human beings become who they are by the choices they make and how they live their lives.

In his twenty-five years as pope, his flair for the dramatic underscores not only his public appearances but also his literary legacy. The former can be seen, for example, in his dialogue with Jewish leaders. The first pope ever to visit the synagogue in Rome, John Paul II also welcomed the chief rabbi at the Vatican and stood beside him on the loggia of St. Peter’s Basilica. Considering that on this balcony a pope ordinarily appears only at the time of his election and to deliver the annual Christmas or Easter message, this symbolic act sent a message to the city and to the world that Christians and Jews remain always close in religious kinship.

His dramatic sensibility is founded on a solid determination about human existence. As is evident throughout his writings, John Paul II believes that our lives are a drama, a story of truth and goodness and beauty whose scenes vary with the free choices we make in the context of the culture in which we live. Every human being aspires to these ultimate goods; but the potential for tragedy lies close at hand.

Do we discern our human values in terms of material success or spiritual well-being? Do we make personal choices based on utilitarian self-interest or on benefit to the common good? Do we construct social meaning by a claim to relativistic rights or by adherence to a natural law? For twenty-five years now, this pope reminds us, at times forcefully, that a “happy ending” to life’s drama will appear only when we consider the mysteries of faith as fundamental to truth, the culture of life itself as the primordial good, and a civilization of love for all peoples as the most resplendent beauty.

Pope John Paul II remains convinced that the answer to life’s questions, and the resolution to our human story, is to be found in the person of Jesus Christ, the redeemer of humanity. More than just the title of his first major writing as pope, this truth – that God has redeemed the world in Jesus his son, through the power of the Holy Spirit – determines his insistence that we can and should “be not afraid!”

These days, it seems, the drama of Karol Wojtyla’s life has entered the final act. Yet, even in his suffering, the show goes on, as John Paul II now portrays a faith-filled courage and hopeful conviction that transcend physical limitation. As the curtain slowly falls, let the accolades begin.

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