

‘One can never justify any violation of rights’: John Paul II stands up to a dictator

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Pope John Paul II made his first official visit to the Philippines in February 1981, during which he declared—in the presence of the Marcoses—that

under no circumstances could the violation of a person's dignity or basic rights be justified. **Photo courtesy of Vic Baldoz**

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In February 1981, Pope John Paul II made his first official visit to the Philippines.

It was actually his second visit to the country. In 1973, then-Cardinal Wojtyla quietly visited the Philippines and [celebrated Mass in Baclaran](#) with little fanfare.

Eight years later he returned, but this time as the leader of the Roman Catholic Church.

Already hugely popular among Filipinos, the pontiff was welcomed by massive crowds wherever he went—Manila, Cebu, Davao, Legazpi, Bacolod and Baguio, as can be seen in footage shown in [a "News To Go" report from 2011](#).

The Pope was in the country to beatify several martyrs, including Lorenzo Ruiz, who would become the Philippines' first saint. It was the first beatification ceremony [to take place outside Rome](#).

With public unrest already stirring against them after years of corruption and human rights abuses, the Marcoses sought to position themselves alongside the beloved Pope. In a gesture criticized as having been timed to coincide with John Paul's visit, [Marcos had lifted martial law the month before](#), even though he [retained the decree-making powers](#) he had given himself.

Marcos also had [bronze medals of himself and the Pope made](#) to commemorate the visit.

The Pope, however, was not having it. He had already declined to stay at the Coconut Palace, which Imelda had had built expressly for the pontiff's visit. He said it was too ostentatious, especially given the Philippines'

poverty.

[In a speech at Malacañang](#), he spoke about his gratitude for the warm welcome he received and reaffirmed the Church's stance on issues such as marriage and abortion—and then, to the dictator's face, made a pointed reference to the state of human rights in the Philippines:

Even in exceptional situations that may at times arise, one can never justify any violation of the fundamental dignity of the human person or of the basic rights that safeguard this dignity.

Legitimate concern for the security of a nation, as demanded by the common good, could lead to the temptation of subjugating to the State the human being and his or her dignity and rights.

Any apparent conflict between the exigencies of security and of the citizens' basic rights must be resolved according to the fundamental principle—upheld always by the Church—that social organization exists only for the service of man and for the protection of his dignity, and that it cannot claim to serve the common good when human rights are not safeguarded.

The next day, the Pope visited Tondo, where [he invoked the first Beatitude](#)—"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." This Beatitude, he said, "tells those that live in material poverty that their dignity, their human dignity, must be preserved, that their inviolable human rights must be cherished and protected."

He praised those who are "poor in spirit", including "the one who holds political power and remembers that it is given for the common good only, and who never ceases to devise means to organize all sectors of society according to the demands of the dignity and equality that is the birthright of every man, woman and child that God has called into existence."

John Paul made these remarks in the same year that, according to the

Martial Law Files, Amnesty International estimated that [more than 50,000 people](#) had been arrested in the first three years of martial law in the Philippines, "almost all of whom were detained without charge or trial."

[More than 1,600 people](#) are also said to have been "disappeared" during the Marcos regime.

It was not just in the Philippines that there was huge unrest. In the Pope's native Poland, at around the same time, electrician Lech Walesa had founded and become the leader of the national union group Solidarity, which called for workers' rights.

Years later, Walesa would declare that John Paul II helped to topple the Berlin Wall. It might not be too far-fetched to say that in the Philippines, the remarks of the much-loved Pontiff could also have added to the growing dissatisfaction with the Marcos regime that would come to a head with the assassination of Senator Ninoy Aquino in 1983.

On Sunday, John Paul II was made a saint along with another hugely influential pope, John XXIII. — **Barbara Marchadesch/JDS,GMA News**