The Gospel in Words: The collapse of communism: Reagan, Thatcher and the pope

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Twenty years ago, my wife, Jan, and I were in what was then called West Berlin for a conference. One pleasant afternoon we walked along the Berlin Wall from the Brandenburg Gate to Checkpoint Charlie. During that time, there were significant rancorous anti-Communist demonstrations in East Germany, primarily in the southern part. A German friend, with typical Prussian hubris, dismissed them. "Nothing will come of this, these are just the ineffective rumblings of a bunch of Bavarians."

Three weeks later, the wall fell.

Like many of you, I remember when the wall was built. I remember President John F. Kennedy's speech. The wall coming down seemed impossible. The Cold War seemed to be a permanent condition. The Soviet empire and the West were deadlocked.

But not everyone believed that.

Next week, we will celebrate the fall of the wall, to the astonishment of the world.

How and why did it happen?

Though success has many fathers, three people deserve enormous credit: ***Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II. I do not mean to shortchange Mikhail Gorbachev. He played an important role***, but mostly in reaction to the affirmative moves of the troika.

Reagan was ridiculed by the conventional-wisdom crowd for his quaint anti-communism. He embarrassed many, including some in his administration, with his talk of the evil empire. He was thought naive in his persistence in seeking nuclear disarmament. He was considered rude and unsophisticated when negotiations with Gorbachev collapsed at the Reykjavik summit because of his refusal to abandon his Strategic Defense Initiative. Yet a year later, Reagan and Gorbachev signed the first nuclear-arms reduction of the Cold War.

Reagan's principal tactic to bring an end to the Cold War was to build up conventional weapons and deploy them in Europe. Possibly more significant, however, was the weapon of his rhetoric. (His famous Brandenburg Gate speech was given in June 1986, between the collapse of the Reykjavik Summit and the eventual signing of the nuclear-arms-reduction treaty in December 1987). "General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Thatcher was also indispensable in bringing down the wall. She was a natural and strong ally of Reagan in the quest to dismantle the Soviet empire.

John O'Sullivan, in an article in USA Today, wrote that Thatcher "was the most consistent, outspoken, determined and reliable friend to Reagan and the United States in this final climactic struggle with totalitarian communism."

O'Sullivan notes that Thatcher matched the U.S. arms buildup and was a strong voice against martial law in Poland. "Above all, she rallied the Europeans to ensure the installation of the U.S. missiles in Western Europe to match the Soviet planting of SS-20s in the Soviet satellites."

Finally, the pope. Eight months after becoming pope, he visited his native Poland in 1979 and, arguably, ignited the Polish uprising which led, ultimately, to the collapse of the Soviet empire.

During his nine-day visit, an estimated 13 million Poles saw the pope in person. Nearly all the rest saw him on television or heard him on the radio. George Weigel, in his massive biography of the pope, "Witness to Hope," concludes, "John Paul, though never descending to partisan argument or maneuver, was in fact conducting a kind of national referendum. Before his pilgrimage had begun, the results were in. A revolution of the spirit had been unleashed."

Fourteen months later, an electrician named Lech Walesa signed agreements at the Lenin shipyard at Gdansk, Poland, creating the first legal, independent, self-governing union in the Soviet empire. With extensive help from the Catholic Church at the explicit direction of the pope, Solidarity flourished and led to the first free elections in the communist world.

History is not inevitable. No one foresaw the speed with which the communist enterprise would unravel. Nevertheless, the vision Reagan, Thatcher and the pope shaped by optimism and faith shook hundreds of millions free of the heavy yoke of communism.

Next week: "The Clash of Orthodoxies."

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Questions:

1. What three peopler were instrumental in bringing an end to the Fall of the Soviet Union?

2. Explain each person's roll

