

# Homily of the Funeral Mass of Pope John Paul II

## Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

---

*Homily delivered at the funeral of Pope John Paul II by the  
Dean of the College of Cardinals, 8 April 2005*

“Follow me. “ The Risen Lord says these words to Peter. They are his last words to this disciple, chosen to shepherd his flock. “Follow me” - this lapidary saying of Christ can be taken as the key to understanding the message which comes to us from the life of our late beloved Pope John Paul II. Today we bury his remains in the earth as a seed of immortality - our hearts are full of sadness, yet at the same time of joyful hope and profound gratitude.

These are the sentiments that inspire us, Brothers and Sisters in Christ, present here in Saint Peter’s Square, in neighbouring streets and in various other locations within the city of Rome, where an immense crowd, silently praying, has gathered over the last few days. I greet all of you from my heart. In the name of the College of Cardinals, I also wish to express my respects to Heads of State, Heads of Government and the delegations from various countries. I greet the Authorities and official representatives of other Churches and Christian Communities, and likewise those of different religions. Next I greet the Archbishops, Bishops, priests, religious men and women and the faithful who have come here from every Continent; especially the young, whom John Paul II liked to call the future and the hope of the Church. My greeting is extended, moreover, to all those throughout the world who are united with us through radio and television in this solemn celebration of our beloved Holy Father’s funeral.

Follow me - as a young student Karol Wojtyła was thrilled by literature, the theatre, and poetry. Working in a chemical plant, surrounded and threatened by the Nazi terror, he heard the voice of the Lord: Follow me! In this extraordinary setting he began to read books of philosophy and theology, and then entered the clandestine seminary established by Cardinal Sapieha. After the war he was able to complete his studies in the faculty of theology of the Jagiellonian University of Kraków. How often, in his letters to priests and in his autobiographical books has he spoken to us about his priesthood, to which he was ordained on 1 November 1946.

In these texts he interprets his priesthood with particular reference to three sayings of the Lord. First: “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (Jn 15:16). The second saying is: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11). And then: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love” (Jn 15:9). In these three sayings we see the heart and soul of our Holy Father. He really went everywhere, untiringly, in order to bear fruit, fruit that lasts. “Rise, Let us be on our Way!” is the title of his next-to-last book. “Rise, let us be on our way!” - with these words he roused us from a lethargic faith, from the sleep of the disciples of both yesterday and today. “Rise, let us be on our way!” he continues to say to us even today.

The Holy Father was a priest to the last, for he offered his life to God for his flock and for the entire human family, in a daily self-oblation for the service of the Church, especially amid the sufferings of his final months. And in this way he became one with Christ, the Good Shepherd who loves his sheep. Finally, “abide in my love:” the Pope who tried to meet everyone, who had an ability to forgive and to open his heart to all, tells us once again today, with these words of the Lord, that by abiding in the love of Christ we learn, at the school of Christ, the art of true love.

Follow me! In July 1958 the young priest Karol Wojtyła began a new stage in his journey with the Lord and in the footsteps of the Lord. Karol had gone to the Masuri lakes for his usual vacation, along with a group of young people who loved canoeing. But he brought with him a letter inviting him to call on the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Wyszyński. He could guess the purpose of the meeting: he was to be appointed as the auxiliary Bishop of Kraków.

Leaving the academic world, leaving this challenging engagement with young people, leaving the great intellectual endeavour of striving to understand and interpret the mystery of that creature which is man and of communicating to today’s world the Christian interpretation of our being - all this must have seemed to him like losing his very self, losing what had become the very human identity of this young priest.

Follow me - Karol Wojtyła accepted the appointment, for he heard in the Church’s call the voice of Christ. And then he realized how true are the Lord’s words: “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it” (Lk. 17:33). Our Pope - and we all know this - never wanted to make his own life secure, to keep it for himself; he wanted to give of himself unreservedly, to the very last moment, for Christ and thus also for us. And thus he came to experience how everything which he had given over into the Lord’s hands came back to him in a new way. His love of words, of poetry, of literature, became an essential part of his pastoral mission and gave new vitality, new urgency, new attractiveness to the preaching of the Gospel, even when it is a sign of contradiction.

Follow me! In October 1978 Cardinal Wojtyła once again heard the voice of the Lord. Once more there took place that dialogue with Peter reported in the Gospel of this Mass: “Simon, son of John, do you love me? Feed my sheep!” To the Lord’s question, “Karol, do you love me?,” the Archbishop of Krakow answered from the depths of his heart: “Lord you know everything; you know that I love you.” The love of Christ was the dominant force in the life of our beloved Holy Father. Anyone who ever saw him pray, who ever heard him preach, knows that. Thanks to his being profoundly rooted in Christ, he was able to bear a burden which transcends merely human abilities: that of being the shepherd of Christ’s flock, his universal Church.

This is not the time to speak of the specific content of this rich pontificate. I would like only to read two passages of today’s liturgy which reflect central elements of his message. In the first reading, Saint Peter says - and with Saint Peter, the Pope himself - “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ - he is Lord of all” (Acts 10:34-36). And in the second reading, Saint Paul - and with Saint Paul, our late Pope - exhorts us,

crying out: "My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved" (Phil 4:1).

Follow me! Together with the command to feed his flock, Christ proclaimed to Peter that he would die a martyr's death. With those words, which conclude and sum up the dialogue on love and on the mandate of the universal shepherd, the Lord recalls another dialogue, which took place during the Last Supper. There Jesus had said: "Where I am going, you cannot come." Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied: "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow me afterward." (Jn. 13:33,36). Jesus from the Supper went towards the Cross, went towards his resurrection - he entered into the paschal mystery; and Peter could not yet follow him. Now - after the resurrection - comes the time, comes this "afterward." By shepherding the flock of Christ, Peter enters into the paschal mystery, he goes towards the cross and the resurrection.

The Lord says this in these words: "... when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go" (Jn. 21:18). In the first years of his pontificate, still young and full of energy, the Holy Father went to the very ends of the earth, guided by Christ. But afterwards, he increasingly entered into the communion of Christ's sufferings; increasingly he understood the truth of the words: "Someone else will fasten a belt around you." And in this very communion with the suffering Lord, tirelessly and with renewed intensity, he proclaimed the Gospel, the mystery of that love which goes to the end (cf. Jn. 13:1).

He interpreted for us the paschal mystery as a mystery of divine mercy. In his last book, he wrote: The limit imposed upon evil "is ultimately Divine Mercy" (Memory and Identity, pp. 60-61). And reflecting on the assassination attempt, he said: "In sacrificing himself for us all, Christ gave a new meaning to suffering, opening up a new dimension, a new order: the order of love ... It is this suffering which burns and consumes evil with the flame of love and draws forth even from sin a great flowering of good" (pp. 189-190). Impelled by this vision, the Pope suffered and loved in communion with Christ, and that is why the message of his suffering and his silence proved so eloquent and so fruitful. Divine Mercy: the Holy Father found the purest reflection of God's mercy in the Mother of God. He, who at an early age had lost his own mother, loved his divine mother all the more. He heard the words of the crucified Lord as addressed personally to him: "Behold your Mother." And so he did as the beloved disciple did: he took her into his own home" (Jn. 19:27) - *Totus tuus*. And from the mother he learned to conform himself to Christ.

None of us can ever forget how in that last Easter Sunday of his life, the Holy Father, marked by suffering, came once more to the window of the Apostolic Palace and one last time gave his blessing *urbi et orbi*. We can be sure that our beloved Pope is standing today at the window of the Father's house, that he sees us and blesses us. Yes, bless us, Holy Father. We entrust your dear soul to the Mother of God, your Mother, who guided you each day and who will guide you now to the eternal glory of her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Translation of the Holy See.*