

## **HOMILY ON THE DEATH OF POPE JOHN PAUL II**

*(At the request of a number of people who attended the Parish Mass for Pope John Paul II on Monday, April 4<sup>th</sup>, we are reprinting the homily given at the Mass by Msgr. Brennan.)*

As we have seen and heard for the last few days, we could literally spend hours speaking about this man, Karol Wojtela, who, twenty-six years ago, was elected pope and took the name Pope John Paul II. He took that name for the same reason that his predecessor had taken it: because he saw his role as completing the work begun by Pope John XXIII, who had called and presided over most of the Second Vatican Council, and Pope Paul VI who began to implement the changes called for by the Council. However, they all saw that their primary role was to maintain the teachings of the Church intact while bringing the Church into the twentieth century.

On October 6, 1995, His Holiness Pope John Paul II came to St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers to pray with the seminary community. (I had the great privilege of being in the sanctuary that evening.) In his homily, the Holy Father said, "If there is one challenge facing the Church and her priests today, it is the challenge of transmitting the Christian message whole and entire, without letting it be emptied of its substance. The Gospel cannot be reduced to mere human wisdom. Salvation lies not in clever human words or schemes but in the cross and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ."

This statement of our late Holy Father brings me to the first point I would make tonight: that the Pope - indeed all three popes we mentioned at the outset - were called by God, not to be "conservative" or "liberal", as the world would want them to be, but to be "orthodox", that is, to continue to teach what the Church teaches and has always taught. The last thing our God wants for His Church - for the Church **is** Christ - is to be "politically correct" to accommodate the morals of the times, morals which, in our time, seem to change every few years, while God's moral code as revealed through Jesus remains constant.

One of the realities that should have impressed us all these past few days is that the Holy Father has been the one and only true moral leader in today's world. Can you think of any other? Can you name any other church leader or political leader whose death would have provoked such an enormous outpouring of respect, admiration and love from all over the world? The man's holiness, combined with his great intelligence both as a philosopher and a theologian, as well as his genuine compassion for all people everywhere, especially the poor and oppressed, led everyone who met him and millions who did not, to recognize that here was a man who was not only the leader of the largest church on earth but also the clearest voice of moral fortitude and consistency in today's world.

His role was to proclaim the word of God, the teachings of Jesus Christ and His Church, whether those who were listening wanted to hear them or not. Why was this true? Because he did not speak just as a man who was the leader of the one true Church but because he was the Vicar of Jesus Christ on earth, as were all his predecessors and as will be his successor. Guided by the Holy Spirit of God, the pope speaks the truth, something not everyone wants to hear but something that cannot be refuted because it comes from God.

He was the most traveled pope in history, not because he loved to travel, but because he was driven by the Spirit to bring the word of Jesus to every corner of the world. In the first Reading this evening from the Acts of the Apostles, we heard the first pope, St. Peter, proclaim about Jesus, "He commissioned us to preach to the people and to bear witness that he is the one set apart by God as judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets testify, saying that everyone who believes in him has forgiveness of sins through his name." It was this message of Compassion and Reconciliation that Pope John Paul II spent his entire papacy bringing to all people everywhere. He reached out to the Jewish people to ask for their forgiveness for whatever role the Church had played in their persecution. He reached out to the Church of England, to many Protestant leaders and to the Eastern Orthodox churches to do whatever he could to resolve centuries of animosity. He reached out to Muslims and other non-Christian religions around the world to do whatever he could to bring about the fulfillment of the prayer of Jesus that there be one flock and one shepherd. As more than one person said over this past weekend, He was the Pope of the Catholic Church but he was also everybody's Pope. Indeed, one of the greatest gifts he gave to us was the new Catechism of the Catholic Church which clarifies for all, Catholics and non-Catholics, precisely what the Church teaches, a clarification much needed in a world that rejects absolutes and makes everything relative.

The second reading from Romans 8 speaks of suffering and truly the Pope was a man who suffered in many ways. He was raised in poverty under a Nazi regime during which, because of enforced food rationing, he ate perhaps one meal each day. His mother died when he was only eight and his father died when the pope was only 21. At the age of 24 he was struck by a Nazi army truck and almost died but survived to be ordained to the priesthood in 1946. Soon afterwards he left for Rome to study and begin his rise in the Church.

With the end of World War II came the beginning of the Communist regime in Poland where he was an outspoken critic of the government. While attending the various sessions of the Second Vatican Council he was named the archbishop of Krakow, continuing his ongoing criticism of the Communists. Finally, following the unexpected death of Pope John Paul I, and after a number of ballots had been cast with no Cardinal receiving the required two-thirds vote, the Archbishop of Krakow was elected as a compromise candidate on October 16, 1978. He was the first non-Italian pope in 455 years and took the name John Paul II for reasons we have already noted.

Two and a half years later, while conducting a public audience in St. Peter's Square, he was shot four times in an assassination attempt. Though seriously wounded, he recovered and went on to publicly forgive and embrace his assassin in a display of reconciliation that exemplified the role he would carry out in many other ways, that of forgiving the sins of others and asking for forgiveness.

The illnesses that have afflicted him for the last several years have been well chronicled so we need not review them here. What we should reflect on is the magnificent example he gave us of two very important points of our Catholic Faith: first, that *everyone*, regardless of their age and/or illness, is a special and valued individual and second, that suffering is a part of life and, indeed, a very important part when we place it in the context of its redemptive power as shown by Jesus in His suffering and death which redeemed the whole world. In the second

reading Paul states very clearly, “The Spirit himself tells us that we are children of God, but if we are children then we are heirs as well, heirs of God, heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with Him so as to be glorified with him. I consider the sufferings of the present to be as nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed in us.”

Quite obviously we can apply these words to our Holy Father and see how he not only lived with his suffering but he used it as Christ tells us to use it, offering it for the salvation of the world. The two lessons then are that elderly people are to be valued just as much as young people, and suffering has a power that comes from God if only we join it to His suffering. It was in this vein that he was such a determined defender of life in all its stages and who, in these last couple of years, developed the Theology of the Human Body to clarify the sanctity of the body as a dwelling place of God.

The Gospel tells us of the wheat that falls into the ground and dies, bringing forth much fruit. John Paul was that grain of wheat. He was not out to please people by telling them what they wanted to hear. His purpose was to convert people to Christ by telling them what they *needed* to hear, namely, the truth. So it was that he has been criticized often for continuing to defend the Church’s position on abortion, birth control, war, capital punishment, same-sex marriage, homosexual lifestyle, ordination of women, consumerism, humanism, secularism, discrimination and genocide even while other world leaders - and indeed, some professed Catholics among the clergy and laity - were urging him to take a more politically correct stance. He knew what “falling into the ground and dying so as to bear much fruit” truly meant for he experienced suffering in many forms over and over again.

He lived the Beatitude which says, “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me; rejoice and be glad for your reward in heaven is great.” I am sure that there is no doubt in the minds of any of us or of anyone anywhere who is aware of the life this man lived - that this, as well as the other seven Beatitudes, were not only lived by him but have led to the fulfillment that is promised by the Lord, the kingdom of heaven.

What is our role now? First of all, to continue to give thanks to God for the extraordinary gift that Pope John Paul II was to our Church and to the world. It is the feeling of many that he will one day be known as Pope John Paul the Great, a title that has been given to only two other popes, Leo the Great and Gregory the Great, both of whom lived over a thousand years ago. It has been our privilege and to our benefit that, at a time when much of the western world has embraced humanism, secularism and consumerism, that the Holy Father has defended and proclaimed Catholicism, with all its gifts, as the surest way to truly find the peace that God promises to all his faithful.

The other thing we must do now is to pray that those cardinals who are even now gathering in Rome, first for the Holy Father’s Mass and burial, then for the conclave to elect a new pope, will be open to the Holy Spirit to choose the man that God wants to lead His Church. This is not a matter of church politics as some of the media commentators present it. It is a coming together of church leaders to respond to the inspiration of the God they represent so that *His* will continue to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Looking back over the past seventy-five years and six popes, I have seen just the right man ascend to the throne of Peter

each time. Pius XII succeeded Pius XI and by his brilliant encyclicals on the Mass, the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, and the Sacred Scriptures, he laid the groundwork for the Second Vatican Council. Then John XXIII was sent to call the Council and Paul VI was sent to implement the teachings of the Council. Next came John Paul I who, in God's providence, was quickly called to heaven to open the way for John Paul II.

Clearly, then, our Catholic Church is being led by holy men who are called by God at specific times for specific purposes, so that She may continue her mission of bringing the world to Christ. We can pray with great confidence that God's purpose will be carried out by the next Vicar of Christ on earth. May our beloved Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, rest in the arms of Christ whose Vicar on earth he was, and may the Lord God our Father, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, continue to watch over and guide the Church of Christ and reveal His unconditional love to us all.