



## *THE POPE OF THE SACRED HEART: Remembering John Paul II*

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*by Sister Mary Charles*

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### **Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,**

One of the vivid memories we Catholics oftentimes carry within us is the death of a pope. As a little girl of seven or eight, I remember to this day the somber black canopy which hung over the entrance to our parish church marking the death of Pope Pius XII in 1958. Years later, as a novice in our Wilmington, Delaware monastery, I experienced the awe and sorrow of Pope Paul VI's death, on the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1978. Then, in only a few brief weeks' time, during our hour of early Morning Prayer, the announcement came of the sudden death of Pope John Paul I. I can still hear in my memory the quiet sobs of our sisters.

Thankfully, we were given the gift of a twenty-six year pontificate of our Holy Father John Paul II. But after such a lengthy and fruitful ministry, the world mourned the passing of our beloved pontiff on April 2, 2005, exactly one year ago this very day. The death of a pope, but perhaps most especially the death of John Paul II, stirs up profound sentiments in the collective consciousness of the world. John Paul's personal and spiritual dynamism touched millions of souls and enkindled a stronger desire for God in people's minds and hearts. As Pope Benedict XVI has often stated, "He (John Paul) was unforgettable."

In recalling the first anniversary of the death of John Paul II, I would like to reflect on some qualities of his life and ministry that make him the "Pope of the Sacred Heart." I believe that these heart qualities point us toward the Heart of our Redeemer, inviting us to open ourselves more fully to its inexhaustible love for each of us.

John Paul was often referred to as the "Philosopher Pope." In his extensive corpus of writings, he often wrote of the value of the human person and was committed to the philosophy of personalism. During the Second Vatican Council's working sessions (particularly the sessions on *Gaudium et Spes* – the document that became known as the Church in the Modern World) John Paul spoke on personalism. In his last published book, *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, he recounted how the renown French theologian Father Henri de Lubac came to him and said, "Yes, yes, yes, personalism that is the way forward." The belief system of personalism stressed the value of the human person, as well as the importance of having a moral compass to one's life, with emphasis on freedom, dignity, and responsibility. A British personalist once wrote, "Each self is a unique existence, which is perfectly impervious... to other selves... I have a center of my own, a will of my own, which no one shares with me or can share-a centre which I maintain even in my dealing with God." Personalism gives priority to authentic spiritual character especially against the forces of

God be Praised!



technologies and ideologies that seek to enslave and dominate the human person. Meaning and purposeful action are enhanced through personalism.

John Paul's great interest and outreach to the human person, originating from his personalist approach to life, reminds us that we are made in the image and likeness of God. We are endowed with human resources that turn us "personally" to the very Heart of God and we are not completely "ourselves" until we find and possess the God who made us persons. It also tells us that the human person is more important than any technology and ideology in the world. It is the human heart that counts most to God, not the mastery of machines and ideas.

The story of John Paul's "American souvenir" can help illustrate his great love of what the human person stands for. In 1976 while still a cardinal, John Paul acquired a memento of the city of Baltimore, while on tour in Philadelphia. The memento was a printed parchment which he took home with him and hung in his office as a daily reminder of what being a good person is all about. Eventually, it made its way to the Pope's office in Rome. It contained the words of the well-known, down-to-earth philosophy of "Desiderata":

"Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story. Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however, humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time. Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals; and everywhere life is full of heroism. Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is perennial as the grass. Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be careful. Strive to be happy." (from Nino Lo Bello's book *The Incredible Book of Vatican Facts*)

John Paul referred to "Desiderata" as *verbum sapienti*...words of wisdom! John Paul II was also known as "the People's Pope." Throughout the years of his pontificate there were encounters with



millions of people throughout the world. His pastoral outreach was vast and enormously effective, bringing the Good News of the Gospel to all peoples. He, himself, believed that his role should reflect that of the Good Shepherd who gave His life for the lives of all. He writes in his last book these thoughtful words:

“I have always been convinced that if I am to satisfy the people’s hunger for the Word of God, I must follow the example of Mary and first listen to it myself and ponder it in my heart. I have also come to realize that a bishop must be able to listen to the people to whom he preaches the Good News.” He further says, “The honor comes from his mission to stand at the heart of the Churches as the first in faith, first in love, first in fidelity, and first in service.”

Personal prayer was at the heart of John Paul’s apostolic zeal. Looking at him in prayer was a study in intensity. God was an all-consuming presence. He once confided to a group of young people in Spain that all that he did for the cause of Christ and for the service of others was worth it. The people who received his message echoed his words over and over, chanting: “It’s worth it! It’s worth it!” The strength that comes through prayer made it so.

On his many pastoral journeys, John Paul, spoke clear, heartfelt, liberating words to the people of all nations. He said things like, ‘The Pope wants to be your voice, the voice of those who cannot speak or who are silenced. The defender of the oppressed, who have the right to effective help, not the crumbs of justice.’ He is the great advocate against fear... ‘The greatest weakness in an apostle is fear,’ he wrote. “What gives rise to fear is lack of confidence in the power of the Lord; this is what oppresses the heart and tightens the throat. The apostle then ceases to offer witness... Fear in an apostle is the principal ally of the enemies of the cause. ‘Use fear to enforce silence’ is the first goal in the strategy of the wicked. The terror used in all dictatorships depends on the fearfulness of apostles. Silence possesses apostolic eloquence only when it does not turn its face away from those who strike it. So it was in the case of Christ’s silence... Christ did not allow himself to be terrorized. Going out to the crowd, he said courageously: ‘I am he.’ ”

I will always remember a short story told about the Holy Father when he was making his historic visit to the Middle East in 2000. Because of the possibility of violence breaking out and even a direct assault upon the person of the Pope, John Paul was recommended to wear a bullet-proof vest. He declined the offer, however, and simply said that he would put his trust in the Lord.

The qualities of trust and confidence, so evident in Pope John Paul’s approach, marked every aspect of his pastoral leadership. He trusted people and people in turn, sensing his implicit trust, responded in kind. Ultimately, the source of John Paul’s ability to speak so effectively to the human heart came from his own personal meditation and devotion to the Sacred Heart. In the introduction to a recent work on John Paul’s Sacred Heart connections we discover:



Karol Wojtyla learned devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus as a young boy in Poland and retained its practice throughout his life. As cardinal archbishop of Krakow he wrote a pastoral letter to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which had first been celebrated in Poland. In this letter dated June 11, 1965, he quotes his favorite invocation from his favorite prayer, the Litany of the Sacred Heart: "Heart of Jesus, fountain of life and holiness." It is not surprising that as Pope John Paul II he has said and written so much on the Heart of Jesus, more in fact than any other pope in history. If any pope deserves the title of "Pope of the Sacred Heart" it is Pope John Paul II. [from Holy Father, Sacred Heart: The Wisdom of John Paul II on the Greatest Catholic Devotion, edited by Carl J. Moell, S.J., The Crossroad Pub. Co., 2004]

Was it God's providence at work then when Cardinal Karol Wojtyla was elected pope on October 16, 1978, the liturgical feast day of our Visitandine sister St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, known as the "Apostle of the Sacred Heart?" And was it not equally incredible to witness John Paul II's death on the eve of the great feast of Divine Mercy Sunday? It was as if the entire span of his pontificate were enclosed within the very heart of God.

To be sure, John Paul II has left us a rich legacy of devotion to the Sacred Heart. Although not writing a formal encyclical letter on the Heart of Jesus, he has consistently promoted Sacred Heart spirituality in papal documents and other messages, in addresses throughout his many apostolic travels, in his beatifications and canonizations, and in his own prayers and commentaries delivered for special occasions. Most of all, it is by his own personal witness and example that we are inspired to draw closer to the Divine Heart.

In his teachings about the Sacred Heart there are some themes to which he wishes us to be attentive. These themes are perennially important to Sacred Heart spirituality and bear repeating and emphasis. Here is a sampling of some of them:

In the Heart of Christ the human heart comes to know the true and only meaning of life and destiny, to understand the value of an authentically Christian life, to protect itself from certain perversions, to unite filial love for God with love for the neighbor. In this way – and this is the true meaning of the reparation demanded by the Heart of the Savior – on the ruins accumulated through hatred and violence can be built the civilization of love so greatly desired, the kingdom of the Heart of Christ.

The abundant spiritual fruits which come from devotion to the Heart of Jesus are widely recognized. Expressing itself in particular through the practice of the Holy Hour, confession, and Communion on the first Friday of the month, it has encouraged generations of Christians to pray more and to participate more frequently in the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist. Those are ways still appropriate for proposing to the faithful of today.



The Heart of the only Son, the Heart pierced on the cross, is the mature fruit of God's Eternal love for human beings. The truth of St. John's letter is inscribed in this Heart: "God loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins (1 John 4:10). There is no greater love than this. "No greater love has a person than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). There is no greater love than that which, at the end, is manifested in the Heart pierced by the lance of a centurion on Golgotha.

There is nothing that we need more than Divine Mercy – that love which is benevolent, which is compassionate, which raises us above our weakness to the infinite heights of the holiness of God. Anyone can look at the picture of the merciful Jesus, his Heart radiating grace, and hear in the depths of his own soul what Blessed Faustina heard: "Fear nothing, I am with you always." And if this person responds with a sincere heart: "Jesus, I trust in you," he will find comfort in all his anxieties and fears. In this dialogue of abandonment, there is established between the human person and God a special bond that sets love free.

The Gospel of God's love finds its highest expression in the Eucharist. In the Mass and in Eucharistic adoration we meet the merciful love of God that passes through the Heart of Jesus Christ.

We must pass from the worship of the Heart of Jesus to the culture of the human heart. The Gospel teaches us the profound culture of the human heart. The saints are those persons who have acquired a supreme culture of the heart: The Virgin Mary has done this with her Immaculate Heart. Behold all of us must acquire from the Heart of Jesus and from the Heart of Mary a deep culture of our hearts. It is here that Christianity stands, lived as experience and as witness. The Heart of Christ is the Heart of the Son of God, but also a heart that is profoundly human. You cannot think of anything more human, any reality more human than the Heart of Christ. [summarized from Holy Father, Sacred Heart; edited by C. J. Modi, S.].}

There is an apt saying in the spirituality of our founder St. Francis de Sales that "whoever wins a person's heart has won the whole person." John Paul II's final farewell was a sure sign that the hearts of millions were won by the profound goodness and incomparable spirit of this beloved pope. Watching the funeral Mass with the rest of our community, I could hardly see a dry eye around me. John Paul touched the human heart at a very deep level. We miss him still, but sense his abiding presence and the gift of his heavenly blessing and joy.