

John Paul II opened the doors to Christ

He proclaimed Christ - "always and everywhere." In this way, Karol Wojtyla, Pope John Paul II, manifested his holiness. And for the way he lived his life, he has been declared among the "blessed" of the church by his successor, Benedict XVI.

Barely six years after his death, the church formally recognized with the first step of beatification what the crowd acclaimed on the day of his funeral in 2005: "Santo subito" - "sainthood now." The sense of the faithful and the acceptance of his holiness was enough to encourage Benedict, while exercising most normal procedures for the canonization process, to waive the rule that requires waiting five years after a person's death to begin the process. Another confirmed miracle is required after beatification for canonization and enrollment among the church's acknowledged saints.

As Pope Benedict noted, those who encountered John Paul, believers and non-believers alike, seemed to be touched by his holiness. Many saw him on visits to Rome at Masses, the Sunday Angelus, and more than 17 million at more than 1,160 Wednesday general audiences. The Great Jubilee Year of 2000 alone saw the arrival of 8 million to Rome to see the Holy Father and participate in activities for the dawn of the new millennium.

Others witnessed the pope's pastoral visits around the globe, such as his 1995 visit to the U.S. that included a stop in Baltimore, or the World Youth Days he established. In addition to so many people seen in person by John Paul II, his televised Masses and travels made him reportedly the most visible human of the 20th century, and likely of all history to date.

But being famous or being a prolific theologian does not qualify one for sainthood. Those who somehow experienced a connection to John Paul came away with a sense of His Holiness' holiness. He paused for meditation within the Mass. He took time in an intensely busy schedule for prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. He was once asked if he was too busy to pray, and he said he was too busy not to pray.

Years ago, I asked a friend and former Catholic press colleague who served in the Vatican as an archbishop (later a cardinal) to say a prayer for someone I knew. He said, let's do what the pope does, and stopped immediately and prayed for the intention. He explained, if you ask John Paul to pray for someone, he would not add it to his prayer list for later, but would stop and pray the intention at that moment.

The personal connection is what moved more than a million people to come to Rome for John Paul's beatification, the largest crowd in Rome since his funeral. The crowd offered a sustained ovation - more than five minutes - after Benedict pronounced the formal declaration that John Paul II is now among the "Beati."

What's next? The canonization process needs another miracle, so we can pray for the intercession of Blessed John Paul for miracles and healing.

But what about us? The next step for those who feel a connection to John Paul II is not to stop admiring his holiness, but to attempt to emulate it. His life growing up in Poland, where he lost family at a young age, cannot be duplicated. Neither are we all called to the priesthood or service as a bishop, and fewer still as pope. But we can all do more of what Karol Wojtyla did well and often: read the word of God; learn about the Lord; and pray, pray, pray.