

Presidential Address

Six weeks ago Pope John Paul II came to the United States and to the United Nations. In a few full days, he gave our nation, and our world, a remarkable lesson in leadership, a lesson of consistency and courage, rooted in the gospel of Jesus. In pouring rain and driving wind and bright sunshine, in cathedrals and ballparks, at the United Nations and at a race track, he spoke the truths of our faith and affirmed the best of our nation's values and challenged us to live up to both. From the moment he arrived in Newark until he left us in Baltimore, he urged us to ground freedom in truth, to proclaim moral responsibility as an indispensable value for our day, and to preach the gospel in season and out of season, without fear. The Holy Father did this in an extraordinary context: what many of us saw and felt at Denver two years ago now touched ordinary people in the venues of the visit and the streets of our cities, and reached millions more through television. In ways which seemed transparent to the guiding power of the Holy Spirit, this Successor of the Apostle Peter made the gospel of Jesus come alive as he confirmed us in our faith and called us to help build a civilization of love in the United States of America. At every step of the visit — and this we heard as the trip progressed — people watched and watched, touched deeply by his celebration of the Eucharist and his leadership at other prayers, and attentive to his preaching. We saw Catholic people rejoice in our belief that Peter is the rock upon which Jesus built his Church and, for all the diversity found in this land, we saw them experience in a profound way our unity in the Church — the Church as the communion of those called, according to God's plan and purpose, to be the Body of Christ in which all things work together for good (Cf Romans 8:28), and this communion expressed itself in an outpouring of deep affection for the Holy Father. Here let me say a word about the media, about those who helped bring Pope John Paul and his message to our people and our neighbors. Last year and the year before, I took the occasion of this address to point out ways in which media reporting had missed its mark, nationally and internationally, in telling the story of the Church and the Pope. This year, I believe, the coverage of the Papal pilgrimage set a new standard of excellence in reporting and commentary. The Holy Father's messages came through clearly and in the context of his teaching. I wish to express thanks to those who made it happen. Why did this media shift occur? For one thing, it is very clear that, as we have taken the media more seriously, so also

they have taken us in the Church more seriously. But, more than any other factor, I believe, what made the difference this year is the that the media understand at last who Pope John Paul really is. They had seen his book and recordings become world-wide bestsellers, read why Time chose him to be Man of the Year, and been amazed at the millions who flocked to hear him at Manila. When Pope John Paul II spoke to the United Nations, something quite remarkable took place: before the assembled representatives of the temporal powers of this world, and before a television audience that may have reached a billion, the moral leader of the world — a man whose power is the truth of which he is both custodian and witness — reflected in a profound way on the human condition at the threshold of the new millennium. No other world leader speaks to humanity, or for humanity, quite like John Paul II. Why is that? I suspect it has to do with the past seventeen years of public witness in service to the truth about the human person. For him the human person is not a philosophical abstraction. He is able to help us see, in the drama of every human life, the supreme drama of God's creative and redemptive action in history. And so the Holy Father can be, as he said at the United Nations, "a witness to hope" at the end of a century of fear.