

St. John Paul II Feast Day - Exhibit Opening

Introduction

This evening, we gather in thanksgiving and joy as we celebrate the feast day of St. John Paul II. Our joy is compounded as we see all about us how this Shrine, named in his honor, is progressing. It has already become a place of pilgrimage, prayer, and devotion, where many come to seek the powerful intercession of St. John Paul II. It is a place of study and reflection on the profound thought and magnificent teachings of this philosopher, priest, and Pontiff. And it is a place that tells the story of the life of Pope John Paul II, masterfully combining the chronology of his life with the themes of his witness and teaching.

Some weeks ago, I came here to the Shrine with a group of bishops who were in town for meetings. The Knights very kindly had invited us for dinner and for a tour of the exhibit. Because of my work as chaplain, I knew of the plans and themes of the exhibit and also knew of the great thought and care invested in each aspect of it. Nonetheless, the exhibit took me by surprise. It wasn't like going through an art gallery or a presidential library. On the contrary, I sensed the presence of the saint, here within these walls. I felt his presence as I heard his voice and saw his life unfold before my eyes. I was struck by the brilliance of his mind and the greatness of his spirit as he lived fully the drama of the twentieth century and led the Church into a new millennium.

Light from Scripture

That is why today's reading from Isaiah resonates in my heart, where the prophet says to you and me: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation..." (Is. 52:7).

Karol Wojtyla led a life of missionary discipleship, even from his earliest days, a journey that led him from his native town of Wadowice to university studies, to hard labor in a quarry, and to the underground seminary. Amid the darkness of totalitarianism, the light of Christ shone in his heart where the vision of human

dignity, fully revealed in the Incarnate Redeemer began to take shape and where sparks of holiness were fanned into flame. On November 2nd, 1946, he offered his first Mass in the crypt at Wawel Cathedral and would go on to celebrate the Mystery of Faith for millions upon millions; I remember standing before that altar some years ago, with many of you, filled with a sense of wonderment and joy. With philosophy, drama, music, poetry, theology and prayer, the newly ordained priest, Fr. Wojtyla, knew how to encounter young people and accompany them on their journey toward self-giving discipleship and vocation. And not only young people, but a nation in the stranglehold of communism and a world in the grip of godlessness in its many guises.

How beautiful the feet of this pilgrim who travelled to the II Vatican Council where, as a young archbishop, he helped shape the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World with its seminal teaching on the Incarnate Son as the full revelation of human dignity and the Declaration on Religious Liberty with its stress on the unbreakable bond between freedom and truth. For him, the II Vatican Council was a sign of hope and strength for his native Poland. From the Council flowed those “sources of renewal” – sources he would one day cause flow with renewed abundance and clarity upon the Church throughout the world.

At length, his journey took him over the mountains to Rome where, in 1978, he was elected the 264th successor of St. Peter. Never will I forget my feeling of joy as I saw the image of him on the balcony, blessing the world for the first time. Never will I forget my amazement as I read his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, and watched as his missionary journeys round the world began to unfold. How beautiful the feet that travelled to 129 countries, bringing the message of human dignity revealed in Christ, a powerful message of love, truth, and justice that helped topple Communism, a message of mercy, not as a toleration of evil but rather as transforming love, the message of the new evangelization, the perennial validity of the Church’s mission, the family as the primary subject and agent of the new evangelization, and the dignity of human life and the importance of building a culture of life, coupled with a profound and complete dedication of his life to God through Mary. His was a message that raised up a whole new generation of priests and bishops, that gave hope to religious women and men seeking holiness and apostolic vigor, and gave inspiration to the laity, *without whose witness the new*

evangelization is but a dream. Pope John Paul the Great delivered this message of man's redemption not in a detached way but rather as a prophet would – in the Holy Spirit, with conviction and power – & it has borne immense fruit & will continue to bear immense fruit in years to come!

Do You Love Me?

All of which brings us to the Gospel. Before a prophet leaves home, he must pray, and pray deeply. Many times as a young priest, I accompanied Cardinal Hickey on his trips to Rome and sometimes those journeys brought us to the private chapel of the Holy Father where we were invited to concelebrate Holy Mass. Early in the morning we would file into his chapel and see Pope John Paul II at his *prie dieu*, long since deep in prayer – deep in contemplative, mystical prayer, the source of his prophetic power.

Star struck, I would sit just a few feet away from this man absorbed in prayer and would wonder what the content of his prayer might be. One time, soon after he issued *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, it occurred to me wonder whether Jesus' three-fold question to Peter might be resonating in his heart: "Simon, Son of John do you love me? ... Feed my lambs, feed my sheep ..." Maybe, too, I was thinking of the story of his election as Pope. When asked if he accepted his election as the new Holy Father, Cardinal Wojtyla heard in those words, the question and command of Jesus: "Do you love me? ... Feed my lambs, feed my sheep ..." And his response to that question and command was this: "Our spirit is set in one direction, the only direction for our intellect, will, and heart is – towards Christ our Redeemer, toward Christ the Redeemer of man. We wish to look towards him— because there is salvation in no one else but him, the Son of God!" (RH, 7).

Conclusion

This great Holy Father was so close to the family of the Knights of Columbus. How much he loved us; how well he knew us; how constantly encouraged us! Now in the Providence of God and thanks to the vision of our Worthy Supreme Knight, we are able to transform this building from a center to a Shrine, a place of grace and holiness, truth and love, not only, as it were, to repay St. John Paul II for his kindness to us but much more so, to proclaim the message of his life and pontificate within the Church and before the world.

Aided by the prayers of Mary, the Mother of the Redeemer, may that message go forth from this place, for evangelization of the world, for the salvation of souls, & for the glory of God!

Vivat Jesus!