

The Spiritual Fatherhood of St. John Paul II

Formed and inspired by faithful men, Karol Wojtyła became a powerful father figure for many.

Years ago, while serving as Cardinal James A. Hickey's priest-secretary, I had the privilege of joining a small number of priests who concelebrated an early morning Mass in Pope John Paul II's private chapel. Afterward, the Holy Father greeted each of us as our picture was taken. Of all the photos I had with John Paul II over the years, this one is my favorite: The pope put his hand on my shoulder and smiled at me, the way a proud father smiles at his son. It was a moment when I personally experienced the spiritual fatherhood of John Paul II.

The Radiation of Fatherhood

Pope John Paul II affected many priests in the same way that he did me. Indeed, his spiritual fatherhood radiated through the Church, inspiring a new generation of priests. They were attracted not only by the pope's obvious intelligence, energy and charisma, but even more by his faith, inner strength and fatherly love. Both by his teaching and his example, John Paul II personified the love a father should express toward his family and the love that a spiritual father, a priest, should express toward the Church and her members.

In his beautiful exhortation titled *Pastores Dabo Vobis (I Will Give You Shepherds)*, John Paul II spoke of this spousal dimension of the priesthood. He wrote that just as Jesus gave his very life for the Church, so too must priests make a "gift of self to the Church ... insofar as she is the Body and the Bride of Jesus Christ" (23). In this way, the priest's celibate way of life is far from lonely and barren. Rather, it corresponds to the joy that married couples experience when, even amid suffering and setbacks, they give themselves to each other and to their families. When a priest gives himself to the people he serves, even when this entails great sacrifice, the Lord sees to it that his ministry bears much fruit.

Many have written about John Paul II's relationship with his own father, a man of

faith and virtue. The future pope's mother died when he was 8 years old, yet throughout his formative years, young Karol Wojtyła was blessed by a loving father. Capt. Wojtyła instilled in Karol a passion for history, literature and sports. Above all, he helped his son develop a deep life of faith and prayer, so that he might become the man that God intended him to be. Later, as pope, Karol Wojtyła would write that his father's example of prayer was his "first seminary" (*Gift and Mystery*, p. 20).

As a priestly vocation began stirring in his heart, Wojtyła found a true spiritual father in Cardinal Adam Stefan Sapieha, archbishop of Kraków. During World War II, Polish seminarians had to be formed for the priesthood clandestinely in the cardinal's residence. Here, up close, the seminarian Karol Wojtyła witnessed in Cardinal Sapieha a man of profound faith and great courage in the face of grave and tragic circumstances. It was an example that John Paul II cherished for the rest of his life.

Throughout his ministry as priest, bishop and pope, John Paul II related to everyone as a strong, loving and wise spiritual father. From the very beginning, he reached out to young people — hiking and skiing with them, participating in student theater, teaching them to know and love their culture, and helping them to think critically about life. Most importantly, he encouraged them to discover their dignity and joy in Christ.

When he became archbishop of Kraków, the communist authorities dismissed him as a thinker and dreamer, a poet, playwright and mystic. He was all those things — and much more. Archbishop (later Cardinal) Wojtyła was a courageous leader, an image of the Good Shepherd who guides his flock through dangerous territory. As a wise father, he knew how to deal with the communist regime in order to defend the rights of his people and the freedom of the Church.

Father Figure for the World

In 1979, when he was elected pope, John Paul II embraced a much larger family of faith. Months later he returned to Poland, his fatherland, with a message of human dignity, hope and freedom — the freedom that God the Father offers us in Christ — and soon brought that same message all around the world. Among his earliest pastoral innovations was World Youth Day. Though some of his advisers told him this

idea would never work, Pope John Paul II knew better. Nothing would prevent him from touching the minds and hearts of young people just as his own father had nurtured him in the ways of faith, wisdom and human maturity. Young people responded enthusiastically, turning out in droves, despite predictions of failure. And it seems the older and more infirm that John Paul II became, the more young people loved him. Who can forget the throng of young people holding vigil in St. Peter's Square on the night the pope said, "Let me go to the house of my Father"?

As we celebrate the canonization of St. John Paul II, let us keep in mind his spiritual fatherhood. In his ministry to the family, he taught us to seek the source of fatherhood in the heavenly Father, whom Jesus teaches us to call, "Abba, Father" (Mk 14:36; cf. Rom 8:15, Gal 4:6). He helped us to see how fathers and mothers cooperate and complement each other in establishing a stable home and in guiding their children in the ways of faith, knowledge and love. And always he spoke about fatherhood, motherhood and family as a vocation of love, service and self-giving.

As Knights of Columbus, as fathers of families, as priests who are spiritual fathers, let us ask St. John Paul II's intercession that we may be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect (cf. Mt 5:48).