

John Paul II

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He was beyond all doubt the greatest spiritual leader of the 20th century. His death has been mourned around the globe by leaders and people of all persuasions. He was to all the world a father. He traveled 1,000,000 kilometers—29 times around the world—to meet his children who flocked to his side as to no other's. He took a stand wherever he went with courage and determination. He stood for freedom and denounced communism and dictators. His voice was strong against unbridled capitalism and against all forms of injustice, violence, and war.

He reached out to youth in all his travels, and the young felt specially touched by him. Thousands of them were in St. Peter's Square the night he died. His last message was addressed to them. In the morning of that fateful Saturday, he expressed "I have looked for you, now you come to me, and I give you my gratitude." That night the youth and the crowd of 100,000 in St. Peter's Square prayed to the Virgin for the Pope, "Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death." As they said, "Amen," he faded away into eternity. I met him on two occasions. Both were brief encounters, one here in San Juan, the other in Rome. What I remember from those opportunities I had of being close to him is his envolving presence. He would look at you with those blue eyes as if you were the only person in the world. His look was full of love, and it penetrated deep in your heart. You would always remember that moment. Not what he said to you but how you felt in his presence.

John Paul II left a treasure of legacies to the Catholic church, to Christendom, and to the world. He also left behind controversy as to his stand on the Latin American theology of liberation, on methods of contraception vis-à-vis AIDS prevention, and on other sensitive issues. We cannot demand perfection from any man. We cannot pretend for him to please us in every way. But in reviewing his life, we should not let our dislikes obscure the magnitude of his accomplishments and the richness of his legacy. One can pick and choose within this rich treasure to find what he or she likes the best or deems the most important. Each one of us will have his favorite, and that is how it should be.

For me, his most important legacy is apostolic. He spread the gospel, he took the good news about Christ to all corners of the world. He did so, not merely preaching about Christ, and preaching he did, but by personally living the life of Christ, as in his unflinching commitment to the truth—abortion, thou shall not kill—his courage to take a stand—Iraq and peace—or by bearing suffering for love of mission with fortitude and humility. These, and so many acts of John Paul II, gave his message a coherence that engendered faith in those whom he touched.

This coherence attracted youth from all over the world to his side. He spoke clearly to them about life in Christ, which is not easy. He did not cater to the soft morality with which many seek to bring youth to

Christ. He took his stand firmly but lovingly. He challenged youth to raise their standards and values to those of the man from Galilee. And they responded, because youth has a perception for truth and a need for purpose. They know in their hearts what is false and what is true. They follow instinctively those whose actions are coherent with their messages. This is why they flocked to his side in Rome and wherever he went.

Fruitful reflection on his life, on his death, on his legacy requires each of us to seriously consider what he was all about. He was about Christ. He was all about faith in Christ. He was all about maintaining that faith and spreading that faith. Faith is a gift from God. John Paul II received it in abundance. He set out to share it with others in the world. He communicated it by intellectual persuasion through his encyclicals or books, through emotion in the poetry he wrote, through vigorous contact with nature when we saw him skiing in solitude, but most of all through the vibrations of his heart, which touched our hearts whenever we saw him in prayer, meditation, or in suffering.

Reflecting on John Paul II is reflecting about faith in Christ. This is the most critical matter in our lives. Who was Jesus? Do I believe in Him? This is the question that John Paul II has left behind for each of us to answer. "I am the way, I am the truth, I am life," said Jesus.

This is quite a statement. Before the audacity of such a statement, we cannot remain silent. It requires from us a response: either He is a madman, or He is what He says He is, the Son of God. Who is this man? John Paul II spent his life in order so that we could answer this question. He communicated the gospel, the truth about Jesus, through encyclicals, homilies, speeches, letters, and books. He employed the language of symbols as when he kissed the good earth upon arrival in Puerto Rico as he did on arrival in every country. He communicated through gestures, which expressed the pain he bore and the love with which he carried that pain.

Who was Jesus? This is the primal question for each of us. The path we take at the end of our days depends on the answer we give. Is it a beginning? Or is it the end?