

## **John Paul II handed on the teaching of Jesus Christ no matter what the cost**

**Homily by Bishop Samuel J. Aquila, D.D.**

**April 7, 2005 -- Memorial Mass for Pope John Paul II**

**(Given at the Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo, ND)**

We have watched over the past several days the news on John Paul II's suffering and death. Little did any of us realize on that October 16th day of 1978 the impact that this Pope would have, not only on the Catholic Church but also on the entire world.

Our readings capture well the mission of John Paul II. He was one who is like the apostles of the early Church who proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ no matter what the cost. In our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the apostles continue to teach, even when forbidden. The Sanhedrin are upset that the apostles continue to teach. The apostles respond to the Sanhedrin: "We must obey God rather than men...We are witnesses of these things, as is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him" (Acts 5:29-32.)

The Holy Spirit was given to John Paul II precisely because he obeyed God and not the spirit of our times. He put Jesus Christ first, before anything else, and he received teaching handed on from the apostles, no matter what the cost. Even though there were those who clamored for change in that teaching, he knew that he must obey God before he obeyed men.

In the Gospel reading from John, we hear the words of John as he gives testimony to Jesus Christ. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him" (John 3:36). Those are not easy words for any of us to hear, and yet they are the truth of the Gospel. Obedience to God, love of God, must come first.

John Paul's greatest desire and greatest mission was that all people would hear the good news. He would always propose Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, and never impose it. He would invite others to that truth and always stand for that truth.

We hear within the Gospel that our God is one who "does not ration His gift of His Spirit" (John 3:34.) I believe that in the outpouring that we have seen in the last week, an outpouring far greater than any of us ever imagined, we can see the truth of that word – the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that was given to John Paul II because of his trust and intimacy with the Lord.

John Paul II was, first and foremost, a man of faith, deeply committed to Jesus Christ and to the Gospel of Christ. His entire life was formed by the Gospel, and certainly influenced by the culture in which he grew up. He knew the oppression in the rise of Nazi Germany, in living under Nazism and then communism. Even in the midst of the atheism of his day, he

always proclaimed Jesus Christ no matter what the cost. He took great risk in studying for the priesthood and in his work in the resistance.

He had a deep devotion to and trust of Mary. His motto that he chose, "Totus Tuus" –"all yours" – comes from St. Louis de Montfort. The total gift of one's self to Mary is knowing that she will always take us to Jesus. In his last will and testament, John Paul II entrusts all of humanity, the Church, and his country, to Mary, that they may be led to Jesus—through Mary to Jesus.

He was a man of the Second Vatican Council, who saw the work of the Holy Spirit in that Council. He himself was a bishop and attended all the sessions of the Council. We know that he helped to write the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium Et Spes*, and if you look at the number of times that he quotes that document in his writings, one would probably ascertain that he knew it by heart. He certainly knew *Gaudium Et Spes 22*, which was his favorite and most quoted passage, that in Jesus Christ one discovers the truth, and that truth lives in the hearts of all peoples. "Christ...fully reveals man to man himself and makes His supreme calling clear." In Jesus Christ alone does man discover what it means to be human and the dignity and call God gives to every human being. John Paul stood for Christ and called others to intimacy with Christ so that they may know their dignity and call bestowed by the Father of us all.

John Paul II recognized that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. God alone bestows dignity upon every human being from the moment of conception until natural death. John Paul II consistently taught the message, but it was not his teaching, it was revealed to us by God in Sacred Scripture. It is a teaching that can never change, if we are truly faithful to our God and to the dignity that He has bestowed on every human being.

When one reads his encyclicals, one can see his great intellect. He will be known for his intellect and for his writings; much of which was original thinking. Perhaps the greatest work, and yet the one that has not been unpacked yet, is that of *The Theology of the Body* and the nuptial meaning of the human body, rooted in creation and in the dignity of every human person, of woman and man created in the image and likeness God. It will take us decades to embrace that teaching and to live it. Recognizing his intellect and writings there are those who have already called for him to be named a doctor of the Church, even though he has not been dead yet a full week. He continued to write even to his last. When one looks at the books that he published in the last two years, it is amazing how well his mind continued to work in a body that was frozen and limited by Parkinson's, in a body that experienced pain, yet, he had an indomitable spirit and intellect that continued to work and give praise to God.

We saw him reach out to other Christians and to the Jewish people who he referred to as our elder brothers, to Muslims, to Buddhists and Hindus. In the midst of the respect for all religions, he still taught clearly that as Catholics we must proclaim Jesus as Lord and as the only Savior of the world, because that is what we have received in Sacred Scripture and has been revealed to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His first encyclical, *The Redeemer of Man*, begins with the words, "The Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is the center of the world and history." The motivation for all his words and actions was this great truth of Jesus Christ.

We saw John Paul's youthfulness when he established World Youth Days. People never thought they would work, that the youth would never come out. Some of the best memories I have of our Holy Father are from World Youth Day 1993 in

Denver. I had the privilege of helping to coordinate the liturgies he celebrated and to coordinate the Archdiocesan welcome to him. I will never forget how people said it would never work in Denver, Colorado. Who will come? The city in some ways was terrified. We had been plagued by drive-by shootings week after week that summer. The Secret Service was concerned. Yet, when the Holy Father arrived, there was a calmness and peace that overcame the city, even with over 500,000 young people present. There was not one drive-by shooting in the entire time.

I remember him holding a young man at the foot of the altar, as the young people came up to greet him after Mass. He was sobbing in the Holy Father's arms. John Paul held him tightly to his chest and you could see the Holy Father's love and compassion for the young man. After he left, I asked someone who was the young man and "Why the tears?" I was told that he was from Make-A-Wish Foundation, that he was filled with cancer, and his one desire was to meet John Paul II. A few weeks later, he died with that desire fulfilled. John Paul's love for young people was always so evident in every World Youth Day.

This past December when I was in Rome for my *ad limina* visit, it was amazing to see how frozen John Paul's body was, the difficulty with which he was getting around. But on the great Feast of the Immaculate Conception, he did the entire first part of Mass himself, seated from his chair. Then at the offertory when the gifts were brought forward, there were young Peruvian children who came up to him bearing the gifts. The frozenness left, a smile came, and he patted the children on the head. One could see the joy in his eyes and in his heart as he reached out for the children. He will be sorely missed by the youth of the world.

John Paul II was the most traveled Pope in history. In 1978, when the College of Cardinals elected him, I am sure that they did not know what he would bring to the various continents of the world or the number of miles that he would put on, and the multiple visits he would pay – to Latin America, to Asia, to Europe, to Mexico, to the United States, to Canada. Even when people would say to him, "Holy Father, don't you think you should slow down?" he would still schedule events. He still left one event on his calendar for this year and that was World Youth Day in August in Cologne, Germany. That is the type of stamina, the hope and love that he had. It all stemmed from his faith in Jesus Christ; in his love for Christ that flowed to his love of every human person – whether that person was impoverished or whether that person was well off; whether that person was sick in a hospital bed, being wheeled by his chair, or whether that person could walk well; the young or old; whether that person was of a different belief, or a different culture – he loved every person. He imitated God in that love. He spoke of the dignity of the human person rooted in that belief, that every human person is truly created in the image and likeness of God. His strong and consistent call to peace and justice in the world flowed from his love for Christ. He was a pope of peace, who desired peace for all humanity.

John Paul II was always faithful to Jesus Christ. When we look at his life, we see that he lived that faithfulness day-in and day-out. It is even reflected in his last testament. At the opening of his testament, he used the words from Sacred Scripture, "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matt 24:42). None of us knows the day that our Lord will come to us. We must always be ready as John Paul was.

John Paul was called home to the Father on the evening of April second, within the octave of Easter, during the vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday. He was called home to the mercy of the Father as a faithful servant of Jesus Christ and the Church. In the closing words of his last testament were words also spoken by Christ from the cross. For John Paul in his last years certainly suffered the cross of Christ, but suffered it with joy and with hope, because of his deep love for the

Father. He closes his last testament with the words, "Into your hands Lord I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46) – words that convey that deep trust, that deep love, that total surrender to Christ and the love of the Trinity.

As we continue with our celebration this evening, there is sadness in our hearts as there is in the passing of any human person, especially for one who has touched the world as profoundly as John Paul II has. There is also a tremendous gratitude that floods our hearts – gratitude to God and to John Paul II for his faithful response to the call to holiness given by our God to each and every disciple, gratitude for the many ways in which he faithfully proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, gratitude for his love and his living witness to Christ, gratitude for his courage and fidelity to the message of Christ no matter what the cost. There is hope in our hearts, too – hope, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that John Paul the Great, as he will be known, is now living in the resurrection. He is living in eternity, in the heart of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is living in that love that he proclaimed so well by his pilgrimage here on earth.