A Tribute to Pope John Paul II

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In his letter marking the close of the Jubilee year, Pope John Paul II wrote, “I have often stopped to look at the long queues of pilgrims waiting patiently to go through the Holy Door. In each of them I tried to imagine the story of a life, made up of joys, worries, sufferings; the story of someone whom Christ had met and who in dialogue with him, was setting out again on a journey of hope. As I observed the continuous flow of pilgrims, I saw them as a kind of concrete image of the pilgrim Church, the Church placed, as Saint Augustine says, ‘amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God.’” In part, this passage shows where Pope John Paul II got his energy to write speeches, encyclicals, letters, exhortations, greetings, etc. that fill volumes; to visit more places on earth than perhaps any other public figure ever; to be with his flock in endless long and often tedious ceremonies. For him all of this was an extended love feast; he loved each and every one of us and loved the fact that we are loved by Christ. Pope John Paul II was a true Alter Christus; he wanted to touch us, to be with us, to rejoice with us, to console us, to guide us and to be inspired by us.

Pope John Paul II quite simply loved life and loved every human person, because he understood the true meaning of the human drama. When he looked over a crowd of people, he did not see a “sea of humanity”, or consumers, or polluters, or voters, but he saw souls, souls that God had willed into existence and souls that God wants with Him for eternity, souls that are filled with a longing that only God can satisfy. Each life is infinitely fascinating and infinitely interesting and infinitely important because it is the story of a soul’s journey to God.

I sometimes wondered if, when he looked out over the huge crowds, that amidst all his joy, Pope John Paul II experienced great sorrow at the thought that few people realize how precious they are to God, how loved they are. In his Letter to Families, I found some confirmation of this suspicion in the line: “Man must reconcile himself to his natural greatness.”

It is profoundly sad that we don’t realize how great we are. The greatness of the human person comes from our ability to understand that we are made in the image and likeness of God and from our freedom to embrace that reality as a gift and to love the fact God that made us. The greatest responsibility of the human person, the greatest actualization of his innate dignity, is to live in accord with the truth, the truth about himself, about the world around him, about God. Pope John Paul II understood that all crimes against life are based on falsehoods, are a misuse of our freedom, are crimes against God, against the love that God has for each one of us; he also understood them to be signs of despair, to be instances of the failure to hope.

Those who love life, who love the reality of the human person, wish to live their lives in service of life and to extend Christ’s love to all. They will know that “Love is…the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.” (FC 1) The natural place to learn these truths and these responsibilities is in the family and Pope John Paul II never tired of extolling and explaining the importance of the family. What pained him greatly about the Culture of Death in which we live is that the crimes against life in our times are crimes of mothers and fathers against their unborn children, of sons and daughters against their ailing parents, of health care professionals against their patients. It pained him that we have become so skeptical, so doubtful about the ability to know the truth, that we are comfortable calling evil good and good evil; we have developed the habit of calling crimes rights and considering efforts to protect life and to promote human decency acts of arrogance and intolerance.

When Pope John Paul II lay dying, a friend asked me how I was handling his death. A few years
ago, when I thought of his dying, I froze with grief; I thought the day he died would be one of the darkest of my life since I so admired him and his pontificate. But I responded to my friend that I was really more joyous than sad, that I thought Pope John Paul II and God Himself seemed to have scripted a most beautiful ending to his life. The Holy Father had faced death several times; he survived an assassination attempt and forgave the assassin; he survived cancer; he went into public with his debilitating Parkinson’s and made us realize that even when all he could be was present to us, that presence, sometimes drooling, sometimes silent, was of great consolation to us. When Terri Schiavo was being starved to death, the Holy Father accepted a feeding tube. And then in his last days, he choose not to go back to the hospital, not to go on a respirator or kidney dialysis machine or powerful medication; he allowed the dying process to take over.

Pope John Paul II was a man with a fierce love of life and will to live; he certainly did not “give up” but he was certainly not afraid of death and he would be right to be confident that a legion of angels and saints and his beloved Jesus Christ will be awaiting him with open arms. He showed us how to live, he showed us how to suffer, he showed us how to die, and most importantly he showed us how to love.