

Homily at the Memorial Mass
for His Holiness, Pope John Paul II
Cathedral of Our Lady of Fair Haven
Wednesday, April 6, 2005

Bishop Gabriel Malzaire

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are here today to celebrate the life, mission and death of a great man, His Holiness, Pope John Paul II. We are also here to give thanks to God for the gift of his life to the Church and to all humanity.

For the past few days the eyes of the world have been fixed to the various Television news channels and all ears have been tuned to the Radios, following the events that surrounded the illness and eventual death of the Holy Father.

Invariably, all have described the person John Paul II in no less than glowing terms. As many of the saints of the Church have done before, he makes us proud to be Catholic, he makes us proud to be Christian; he makes us proud to belong to the human race.

For many he was an enigma - like a mystery; a man who cannot be described with a simple phrase. When we thought we understood him, there was still a dimension that was yet to be discovered. He was one whose mystery can be unraveled only by comparison with the one for whom he existed—Jesus Christ.

Christ himself was such a mystery. No one could pin him down to a mere formula. One may not have agreed with what he said and stood for, but one could not fault him for standing on the side of truth. That was John Paul II. Such a one the world can kill but not destroy.

While the Church mourns the loss of a beloved shepherd, our Christian faith tells us that John Paul II will live even in his physical death. Like Jesus and all the saints, he could be even more

effective in his death than in his life. We believe that now that he is with God he will continue to affect the life of the Church that is still on pilgrimage.

Pope John Paul II held the office of the Vicar of Christ. It is an office he held by divine calling. However, despite the privilege that is proper to that office, he had to live up its dignity. No one can doubt that he did so to the best of his ability. In him people saw Christ. He truly acted in *persona Christi* – acting in the person of Christ.

Of the many things said of him I wish to highlight a few:

1. Pope John Paul II was a great unifier and a reconciler. We are aware of the many occasions when he prayed and dialogued with leaders of the various religions of the world. He sought earnestly to live up to what the Church founded by Jesus Christ should stand for.

The Church is structured in such a way that it is of one voice when it speaks. The Bishops, who are successors of the Apostles, should echo the voice of Christ.

Our Holy Father held the position of Chief among the Apostles, a unifying force among God's people, so that the Church does not have different voices and different messages. Despite the variance in theological positions that may exist in the Church, the Holy Father remains a symbol of the unity for which Jesus prayed: "*That they may be one, Father, just as you and I are one.*"

2. Our Holy Father had a passion of truth. This made him a man of no compromise and a fearless leader. From the inception of his pontificate his constant message was: "Do not be afraid." It was his way of saying, if you have the truth and you seek to live by that truth, that truth will set you free. His

disposition to life indicated that for him there was no need for fear since the world and its cares are in the hands of God.

3. John Paul II was a man of prayer. I remember concelebrating Mass with him in his private in August of 1990. I was attending a nine-weeks course with the “Movement for a Better World” in Rome that year, and the group that I was with arrived in the chapel about half an hour before the Mass. So we spent that moment in quiet in preparation for the Mass. I remember watching the Holy Father in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. For that half hour, it seemed like no one else was in the room except him alone and God. He was totally transfixed before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. I was convinced then that he was truly a holy man—a man according to the heart of God. Such depth in his relationship with God made him the resilient person he was in the face of challenges.

There were three other times I was privileged to meet him personally: on his visit to St. Lucia in 1986, as a student in Rome in 1997 and the last time at his Summer residence in Castel Gondolfo in September of 2003. I have otherwise been in places where he was celebrating Mass about a dozen other times. He was a man the every one would like to be close to—a man a magnetic personality.

He was indeed a man of the people – the People’s Pope, as he has been called – always so accessible. This was evident in his expressions of love for people on all levels: the youth, the poor, the sick and suffering, workers, priests and bishops. Everyone wanted to touch him or to be touched by him.

4. John Paul II was a great Teacher. No other pope has written as much as he did. His teaching was based on a certain

philosophy of life. It was based on sound doctrine that he held with conviction.

The philosophy that he subscribed to made him an ardent promoter of the dignity of the human person. For him, human beings were created for one purpose, that is, to image God in the world, and anything in violation of that dignity is fundamentally wrong.

He held the opinion that many of the moral problems that confront the contemporary society could be dealt with more easily if we set our priorities right; that is, to live with a deeper awareness of the reason for which we exist – to serve God. For him God has to be our point of departure, not ourselves or humanity for that matter, only God..

5. John Paul II understood the power of forgiveness in the Christian order of things—not only to grant forgiveness but also to ask for forgiveness. Attempts on his life led him only to say: I forgive you. For him the language of peace did not belong only to the written agreements between nations, it had to become real in the relationships between persons. He was humble enough to publicly ask forgiveness for the sins, the many sins, of the Church.

All these qualities made people love him, even if they did not always agree with him.

7. The Holy Father understood why Jesus, throughout his life remained a point of contradiction. His thinking and the positions he took on life’s issues were sometimes unpopular; but no one could help but respect him for these positions, because he believed what he said and lived what he believed.

8. Our Holy Father was a man familiar with suffering. He knew from very early in his life that witnessing for Christ was always at a price.

The last summer, while visiting Belgium, I was driving with a friend to the city of Gent. She spoke about the pitiful state of the Holy Father who was then on a visit in France. The Television showed him as a feeble man and hardly able to speak clearly. She pitied him in his suffering. I proceeded to indicate to her that the Holy Father considers as part of his mission on earth. He saw a great value in suffering.

You see, when Catholics make the sign of the Cross, they essentially making a statement; saying that this is the sign that characterizes their lives as Christians. It was Paul who said: *“While the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom, here we are preaching a crucified Christ; to the Jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans madness, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1Cor. 1:22-25).* Paul said again in Philippians 3:10 *“All I want is to know Jesus Christ and the power of his Resurrection and to share his suffering by reproducing the pattern of his death.”*

Our world is becoming more and more afraid of the sign of the Cross. Even some Catholics are ashamed of signing themselves because of the pressures that surround them. Not only was Our Holy Father not ashamed of the sign of the Cross, he was not afraid to bear the Cross in his life: “If you want to be a follower of mine,” says Jesus, “Take up your cross and come after me.” What an example he was for us.

Through his suffering, his conviction and his courage John Paul II

gives the entire world a reason to hope and a reason to live.

To my mind, there is no better way of describing the Holy Father than to use the biblical term that most aptly describes him in the office as Vicar of Christ. He was indeed a Good Shepherd. He was an embodiment of the role he carried as a spiritual leader, political leader and moral exemplar.

Indeed John Paul II has a lesson for all of us: for religious leaders, political leaders, for the ordinary Christian, ordinary human being.

I am certain he would want to say to each of us, whatever you do, whatever we say, however we live, must be a source of enhancement to the freedom of others and of respect for dignity of persons. Everything must lead us to our final end, which is God. Anything else is secondary.

John Paul II has left the world a legacy of love; he has left us a legacy of hope. He teaches us how to face the world fearlessly. He teaches how to live and how to die.

As a good steward of the divine privileges I have no doubt that Father has already said to him: *“Well done, good and faithful servant, inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world.”*

May we all learn from such example. Amen.