

GOD'S RESPONSE TO TODAY'S WORLD

Funeral Celebration for John Paul I October 03, 1978

Your Excellency, Bishop in charge of the business of the Holy See, my beloved brother priests and faithful.

In his brief Pontificate, John Paul I has given us the impression that he only had time to give a brief but yet profound response of God to today's world. History will take charge of gathering together the different facets of his life and these will be commented upon in the universal community of the Church because in the brief span of one month John Paul won the heart of the world. It would be impossible --- as we come together to celebrate the solemn prayer of the Archdiocese for his eternal rest and encourage the hope of Church that rises up from the tomb of each Pope so that she might continue to move forward --- it would be impossible to speak about the whole history of these brief thirty-three days because these days were precisely God's response to today's world.

Inspired by this thought I simply want to highlight three aspects of his life: the hierarchical dimension, the Christian dimension and the Marian dimension of his life.

The hierarchical dimension of his life

Why, during this brief period of time, has God called our attention to the one who is the head of the hierarchy? In less than two months we have witnessed the death of two Popes and the election of two Supreme Pontiffs of the Church. The Pope is the highest expression of the authority that Christ shared with the one he has chosen to govern the people that he had gathered together --- the new people who replaced the people of the Old Covenant. The hierarchy is composed of fragile human beings who point out the will of God and who are like channels that guide and govern the Church. They are sacramental signs of this eternal truth and the eternal grace that God has given to humanity, but the hierarchy does not represent the totality of God's grace or God's truth but rather they are a sign of God's desire to communicate with humankind. For this reason the world demands that the hierarchy communicate a spirit of transparency and also understands that the hierarchy does not possess the totality of gifts that God wishes to communicate to the world. The hierarchy is simply a sacramental instrument through which God communicates his grace and truth to the Church.

Thus we can see that the hierarchy is not the totality of the Kingdom of God. Since the hierarchy is like the framework of the Church, the Church demands from them transparency and the fullness of God. The Church understands that she is this people that God has gathered together around the hierarchy. The hierarchy, then, is at the service of the Kingdom of God and of the whole world. Therefore all the efforts of this hierarchical Church cannot be focused on self-contemplation. The Church is not an end in herself and this is even more true of the hierarchy --- they are not an end in themselves. The hierarchy exists for the Church and the Church exists for the world. Thus from the perspective of this eternal Church, the whole world focuses their eyes on Rome when a Pope dies because people know that there in Rome is the sign of this People of God. At the same time, this Pilgrim People,

this missionary people has to focus on another aspect that I want to deal with at this time of the death of the Pope.

The Christian dimension of his life

The Pope is great because God has chosen him to be his Vicar. *You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church. You are the rock of integrity who gives unity and form to this Church that I, Jesus, will build* (1). Neither the Pope nor the bishops build the Church. We are simply the instruments of this great architect. *I will build my Church and the gates of the nether world shall not prevail against it.* This is true not because the Church rests upon the fragile shoulders that were only able to support this tremendous weight for a month, but rather because this symbol of the Pope is sustained by that which is eternal life, immortal, holy, divine: Christ, our Lord. This is what makes John Paul great and that is what has made the last Popes so holy and so Christian --- they are Christians who attempted to transform themselves into an instrument for the world, instruments that speaks of Christ to the world. John Paul could say of himself what the gospel proclaims about the first Christian John: *[John] was not the light, but he came to testify to the light* (2). If John Paul I lit a lamp that illuminated the night of his death, a lamp that enabled people to awaken to the presence of a new light, then we can say that he pointed out the paths of the true Church because the light that he lit is the light of Christ, the light of the Church. They say that the Pope died reading the book, *The Imitation of Christ* and while he read the light remained lit and in his hands was the book of Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Whether this is true or not is not important, what is certain is that John Paul was a great follower of Christ and that he was an authentic expression of what it means to be a Christian.

We note his humility --- *humilitas*, a Latin word that was part of his motto and that appeared on his coat of arms. Humility enabled him to be kind toward children and we saw this as he kissed and embraced the children during his solemn audiences. Through these actions he spoke to the world the same words as Christ: *unless you become like children, you will not enter into the Kingdom of God* (3). His humility was expressed in the simplicity of a Pontificate that renounced the tiara and the *sedia gestatoria*. He wanted to present himself as a simple man who remembered the poverty of his origins. This is another characteristic of his Christianity, a poor Pope, a Pope who fondly remembered the days when had had to walk without shoes, who experienced true poverty in the house of his father who was a laborer and his mother who was employed in a hospital.

The Church of the poor is not demagogy. Christ wanted to rejoice in the happiness of being poor and thus the Pope has pointed out the path for the Church that experiences in her poverty the authentic inspiration of Christ who began by teaching: *Blessed are the poor* (4).

He defended and presented the authentic doctrine of the Church, not as some Inquisitor, but in a way that was evident in the very life of the Church. This doctrine is guaranteed by the fidelity with which he presented himself as a Christian. He promoted and defended a discipline not based on legalism but conditioned by love --- for it is love that moves the Church.

My sisters and brothers, we are speaking about the Christian spirit of John Paul I. Because this Christian spirit is precisely what the hierarchy must bring to the world, John Paul I is loved by the whole Church because he knew how to be not simply a member of the hierarchy who commanded and ruled but knew how to be a Christian who gave example to

others. Thus like Saint Paul, John Paul was able to say: *Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ* (5).

The Marian dimension of his life

The Christian person of John Paul, at the height of his Pontificate, is also characterized by this third dimension that I also want to highlight: the Marian dimension.

How wonderful was his first homily that was proclaimed at the time when he was receiving homage from kings and government representatives. Having been granted the honor of being elected Pope, he experienced his own poverty and invoked the name of Mary. He said that Mary had had been his guide and consolation during the time of his childhood and while he was in the seminary. Mary had inspired him during his priesthood and during the time that he was bishop. So he invoked the name of Mary with the heart of child and asked that Mary would continue to be his mother during the time of his Pontificate¹. He wanted to be able to proclaim with the faith of Mary that Christ is God and that the Church has to live this faith. The more Marian the Church the more Christian will be the Church become --- no one was more Christian than Mary. Mary inspired in the heart of the Pope this Christian sense of tenderness and warmth. Without a doubt Mary taught him how to smile, that wide smile that characterized him before the world. Indeed, one can only be Christ's warm representative on earth if one has this heart of Mary and intimately experiences, like Mary, the mission and the holiness of Christ.

My sisters and brothers, it is for this reason that I want to refer to this third characteristic of the late Pontiff. It is provident that the presence of his body and our gathering before his tomb should occur during this month that the Church dedicates to the Holy Rosary. With great satisfaction I can tell you that his only radio message was directed to Latin American and referred to Mary. Just as his Pontificate was brief so too was his message that was communicated on September 24th to Ecuador where the Third National Marian Congress was coming to a close --- his message was less than a minute. I want to refer to his words here because among all the Latin American nations, only Ecuador had the honor of receiving what we had all hoped to receive in Puebla, the Pope's message of love for Latin America.

The Pope said: *With great joy we want to unite our voices with yours and from our place here in Rome and as Catholics we join together with you in rendering filial and devout homage to our Mother in heaven, the Blessed Virgin Mary. We know that you are celebrating the Third National Marian Congress under the title: Ecuador, through Mary, to Christ. Make this theme, this motto, a program for your life and your apostolic action. May Mary, the Mother of Christ, the Mother of the Church and our dear Mother always be your model, your guide and your way that leads to our elder brother and the Savior of all: Jesus. At this difficult time, at this time that is also filled with hope may Mary be the shining star of evangelization in Ecuador and in all of Latin America.*

This was the Pope's message which concluded with a blessing for Latin America. As members of this Diocese in Latin America, the Diocese of San Salvador, we can say that this gesture of the Pope on the eve of his death united his heart forever with the heart of Latin America. We became united in the one love that is characteristic of Latin America and characteristic of the Pope: our love for the Blessed Virgin Mary.

My dear sisters and brothers, let us live this brief but profound lesson that John Paul I has given us --- God's response to today's world. The hierarchical Church guarantees the unity and integrity of the Church, but this hierarchy must place itself at the service of the world. Therefore, the Church must first of all be Christian and a Church that has a filial love for the Virgin Mary.

I want to conclude by asking you to remember in a special way in your prayers the representative of the Holy See who has kindly joined with us today despite this moment of trial that he experiences. He was just informed that his father is gravely ill and near death. Hopefully this prayer for the Pope and for the Holy See, which he represents, will be seen as a supplication of our Church here in San Salvador, a Church that experiences as her own the pain and suffering and the anguish of all Christians.

My sisters and brothers let us enter into this Eucharist because we have much to pray for and now John Paul is our intercessor in heaven. Our Archdiocese is on our knees and in mourning before his body. With faith and love and gratitude let us embrace his brief but profound lesson. So be it.

¹ See Homily of John Paul I in the official inauguration Mass of his Pontificate (3 September 1978), *L' Osservatore Romano*, 10 September 1978.

Marginal References (1) Mt 16,18: (2) Jn 1,8: (3) Mt 18,3: (Lk 6,20: (5) 1Cor 11,1.