

**107**

## **GOD'S RESPONSE TO TODAY'S WORLD**

### **Funeral of John Paul I**

**3 October 1978**

Esteemed archbishop, envoy of the Holy See, beloved fellow priests, dear faithful. In his brief pontificate John Paul I gave us the impression that he had only enough time for the brief but dense response that God himself gives to today's world. History will take charge of collecting those very rich facets of his life that are already finding their way into the commentaries of the whole of the universal church community because in the brief space of a month John Paul won the heart of the world. So it would be impossible now, as we gather to celebrate the solemn prayer of the archdiocese for his eternal rest and to keep alive his hope for a church that rises up from the tomb of each pope to continue onward—it would be impossible, I say, to sum up all the history of these thirty-three short days because John Paul was precisely that: God's response to today's world. Taking inspiration in this thought, I want only to highlight three aspects of his life: the hierarchical, the Christian, and the Marian.

### **The hierarchical aspect**

Why is God making us pay so much attention in such a short time to the summit of the hierarchy? In less than two months we have seen two deaths and two elections of the supreme pastor of the church. He is the highest expression of the authority that Christ granted for governing this new people being gathered together to inherit the covenant between God and the people. The hierarchy, borne by fragile human beings, indicates the will of God; it is the channel by which the church is guided and governed. But the hierarchy, while a sacramental sign of the eternal truth and the eternal grace given to humankind, is not the whole of God's grace nor is it the whole of God's truth. It is a sign that God wants to share his life with human beings, and that is why the world requires of that hierarchy a transparency of spirit that at once understands and expresses an important truth, namely, that the hierarchy itself cannot exhaust all the richness that God wants to share with the world. Indeed, the hierarchy is simply the sacramental instrument by which God transmits his grace and his truth to the church.

In similar manner we can say that the church is not the whole kingdom of God. If the hierarchy is like the skeleton of the church, then the church herself, which demands of that hierarchy transparency to the fullness of God, understands that she is nothing more than a people assembled by God around that hierarchy, but assembled for the purpose of serving God's kingdom and the entire world. For this reason the hierarchical church cannot concentrate all her efforts on self-contemplation. The church is not an end in herself, and much less is the hierarchy an end in itself. The hierarchy exists for the church, and the church exists for the world. That's why, when a pope dies, the whole world and naturally the church herself fix their eyes on Rome, knowing that the sign of this people of God is to be found there. But this missionary people of God on pilgrimage must focus even more on a second aspect that I want to treat now with regard to the pope who has died.

## The Christian aspect

The pope is great because God has chosen him to be his vicar on earth: «You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church. You are the rock that gives consistency to the unity and the style of the church that I, Christ, am building» (Matt 16:18). Neither the pope nor the bishops build the church. We are nothing more than humble peons of the great architect of the church. «I will build my church», says Christ, and if the gates of hell and of death do not prevail against her, it is not because of fragile shoulders on which she rests, for these would not support the tremendous weight for even a month. Rather, it is because the symbol that is the pope is sustained by the immortal, holy, divine One who is eternal life: Christ, our Lord. This is what makes John Paul great, just as it made the recent popes so holy and so Christian: they were Christians who spoke of Christ and tried to transform themselves into instruments of Christianity for the world. John Paul could say of himself what the Gospel of Saint John says about the first Christian John, «He was not the light himself, but he came to bear witness to the light» (John 1:8). If John Paul lit a lamp that burned during the whole of the night he died and that at dawn illuminated a new day of history—and that was the light of Christ, the light of the church—it is because he pointed out the paths by which the true church should go. They say that he died with the book, *The Imitation of Christ*, in his hands and that while he was reading that little book of Thomas à Kempis, the light stayed burning. Whether that's true or not, what is certain is that John Paul was a great follower of Christ and an authentic expression of what it means to be a Christian.

His humility was proverbial—he even had the word *humilitas* engraved as a motto on his coat of arms. It was humility that allowed him to relate so profoundly and affably with children. It was humility that led John Paul to embrace a child in the solemn audiences as a way of giving the world the same message that Christ gave us: we must become like children to enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:3). His humility was expressed in the simplicity of a pontificate that renounced the tiara and the *sedes gestatoria* and in his desire to be a simple man mindful of the poverty of his origins. This is still another authentic note of Christianity: a poor pope, a pope who fondly remembers the days when he had to walk without shoes and experience true poverty in the home of his father who was a common laborer and his mother who worked in a hospital.

The church of the poor is not demagogy. She is Christ who chose to bask in the joy of being poor. In this way the pope was showing us the right path for a church that finds in poverty the authentic inspiration of the Christ who began by teaching, «Blessed are the poor» (Luke 6:20).

He defended authentic doctrine without the pretensions of an inquisitor, and his was a doctrine grasped in the very life and activity of the church and guaranteed by the fidelity with which he professed himself a Christian. He also defended and fought for a type of discipline that does not consist in legalisms but in convictions and in love because it is love that moves the church.

In a word, sisters and brothers, he embodied the Christian spirit, and because that Christian spirit is what the church's hierarchy must announce to the world, John Paul is loved by the whole church. He is loved because he knew how to be not only a hierarch who

commands and controls but a Christian who sets an example and who can say to the world, like Saint Paul, «Be imitators of me as I am of Christ» (1 Cor 11:1).

### **The Marian aspect**

That is why the Christian stance of John Paul at the summit of the pontificate is characterized also by a third aspect that I also want to highlight: the Marian aspect.

How delightful was that first homily he gave when he was receiving homage from kings and government representatives! Feeling like a poor soul being feted with this world's highest honors, he called on Mary, saying that Mary was his best guide and consoler during his childhood, his seminary days, and in the years that he was priest and bishop. He called on her with a child's heart so that she would continue to be his mother even during his pontificate<sup>1</sup>. He could proclaim with the faith of Mary herself that Christ is God, that the church must live by faith, and that the church will be as Christian as it is Marian because no one has ever been as faithful a Christian as Mary. It is Mary who has taught that papal heart the Christian feelings of tenderness and sympathy, and no doubt Mary taught him to flash that broad smile that so distinguished him around the world. For only by having a mother's heart and being as familiar as Mary is with the holiness of Christ's mission can one hope to be Christ's compassionate representative on earth.

It is for this reason, sisters and brothers, that I wanted to take note of this Marian aspect as a way of concluding this posthumous portrait of John Paul. It is providential that, even as we congregate before his tomb while his body is still present, we are in the month of the Holy Rosary. I can tell you with immense satisfaction that the one and only radio message he was able to address to our Latin America made explicit mention of Mary, and I'd like to cite his words, which were brief, as was his pontificate. The message lasted little more than a minute and was directed to Ecuador, where on September 24 they were holding the final session of the Third National Marian Congress. Of all the Latin American countries, only Ecuador had the good fortune of receiving what we had all been hoping to receive in Puebla, the pope's message of love for Latin America.

«With great delight», said the pope, «we want to unite our voice with yours, and from this center of Catholicity in Rome we want to render an homage of filial devotion and love to our heavenly Mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. We know that you are celebrating the Third National Marian Congress with the motto, "Ecuador through Mary to Christ". Make that motto a full program for life and apostolic action. May Mary, the Mother of Christ and the Mother of the church and the dearest Mother of each one of us, be always your model, your guide, and your sure way to the older brother and savior of us all, Jesus. And may she also be, in these difficult but hopeful times, the star of evangelization in Ecuador and all Latin America».

This was the pope's message, and he concluded by blessing Latin America. And we can say now, from this diocese of Latin America that is the Diocese of San Salvador, that with that gesture shortly before his death, the pope's heart was forever united with the heart of America in the singular love that distinguishes America and that distinguished the pope: love for the Blessed Virgin Mary.

---

<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL I, «Homily in the Official Inaugural Mass of His Pontificate», 3 September 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (10 September 1978).

Dear sisters and brothers, let us live this brief but dense lesson that John Paul leaves us as God's response to today's world. The hierarchical church guarantees the unity and consistency of the whole church, but always in service to the world. That is why she must be a church that is first of all Christian and that has a filial love for Mary the Virgin.

I want to conclude by asking you to pray especially for the representative of the Holy See who has been kind enough to be with us today even though this is a time of trial for him; they just advised him that his father is gravely ill and near death. Let us hope that our prayer for the pope and the Holy See, as whose representative he comes to us, may also mean that our church will feel as her very own the pain of all Christians, the anguish of all her faithful.

Dear sisters and brothers, let us now enter into this Eucharist because we have so much to ask of God. Having John Paul as our new intercessor in heaven, our archdiocese kneels in mourning before his body and absorbs with faith, love, and gratitude the short but powerful lesson he gave us. Let it be so.