

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP

They called him 'Uncle'



While he was still a parish priest, Archbishop J. Peter Sartain met Pope John Paul II with friends in 1993.

At an early age, God planted in Pope John Paul II the capacity to read the signs of the times

BY ARCHBISHOP J. PETER SARTAIN

Editor's Note: The following text was the homily Archbishop J. Peter Sartain delivered May 1 in St. James Cathedral on the occasion of the beatification of Blessed John Paul II.

In the fall of 1978, I was a newly ordained priest, having just returned to Rome for a final year of studies. That summer had been an historic one, with the death of Pope Paul VI in early August and the historically brief 30-day reign of Pope John Paul I. After a summer of ministry at home, I arrived back in Rome in early October, just in time for the conclave that would elect a new pope.

Late each afternoon we students would go to St. Peter's Square along with thousands of others, anticipating that one day soon we would see white smoke billowing from the flue atop the Sistine Chapel. The afternoon of October 16, our expectations were fulfilled. Black smoke turned to gray and then to white, preparing us for the announcement that a new pope had been elected.

A few hours passed before the announcement was made, and when one of the cardinals appeared at a balcony of St. Peter's to announce the news, an unfamiliar name was pronounced — Wojtyla. Many of us scoured the recent edition of the Vatican newspaper, which had published photographs of

all the cardinals. Many of us would not have guessed that a name pronounced "voy-tee-wa" would begin with "w," and it took some time to find the right photo. But among the Polish people present in St. Peter's Square that night, there was no doubt who it was — their beloved native son. They already knew the gift the church universal was receiving, and that gift would unfold for the rest of us over the next 26 years.

Karol Józef Wojtyla was planted firmly in the earth, in a country, in an age and in a beloved family. The circumstances of his life determined, by the grace of God, who he was and who he was to be. He never forgot who had given him birth or who had stood shoulder to shoulder with him as fellow countrymen and women. More significantly, he never forgot that it was God who strengthened him in difficulty, God who showed him the "why" of his life, God who brought his life to flower. Faith had taken root in Karol at a young age, just as he had taken root in Poland. The two were inseparably joined in him, and both made him strong.

Sculpted by faith

Karol was a man of the 20th century. Formed by the personal circumstances of his family, as others of his time had been formed, he knew poverty and loss. Molded by political forces beyond his control, gathered into a brotherhood longing for freedom, he knew oppression and tyranny. Sculpted by steadfast Catholic faith, and gifted with ears and eyes and heart for the things of God, he listened hopefully and confidently for a word from God. He rested peacefully in the compassionate heart of the Mother of God and put everything in her hands at the foot of the cross.

At an early age, God had planted in him the capacity to read the signs of the times, to suffer the aches of his sisters and brothers. He longed intensely for something better; he hoped fiercely that God would have his way; he loved

deeply whoever had want; he believed bravely in a time and place where faith was not allowed. He grew strong and graceful as an eagle.

By grace he heard God's call to be a priest, to love with all his heart the family God entrusted to him. Love them he did, calling their names in the streets of Krakow, listening as they called his in return. "Uncle," they nicknamed him at his suggestion, and he smiled to think they were responding to God's love. Thus it continued, the flowering of Poland's son, and he was ordained a bishop of the church.

I was blessed to see Blessed John Paul II many times, several of those times literally "up close and personal."

It was his habit to allow priests to concelebrate his private morning Mass in the chapel of his residence at the Vatican. I had the great blessing of doing so at least three times. Each time those of us concelebrating would be ushered quietly into the chapel to find him kneeling (or in his later years, sitting) before the tabernacle, praying. The chapel was absolutely silent except for one sound: the sound of the pope's groaning.

I have no doubt he was completely unaware of this, but as he prayed, from some place deep within his heart, he groaned. That sound is indelibly etched in my own heart, as I remember St. Paul's comments that we and all creation groan as we await "adoption, the redemption of our bodies," and how the Holy Spirit "comes to the aid of our weakness ... and intercedes with inexpressible groanings" (Rom 8:18-27).

The Pastor

On another occasion in 2004, I was in Rome for our "ad limina" visit, a visit every bishop in the world makes to the pope every five years. Part of the visit is a private audience with the pope.

I was fortunate to be with him on May 18, his 84th birthday. His health was failing and he showed clear signs of Parkinson's disease, but his mind —

and sense of humor — were very much intact. I began by wishing him a happy birthday and told him a bit about Arkansas, where I was serving at the time. The evening of his election came to mind, and I had to tell him:

“Holy Father, I had the privilege of being in the square the evening you were elected.”

“Five o’clock,” he said, smiling warmly.

“I will always remember that evening,” I told him.

“I will remember, too,” he responded with another smile.

What struck me about that exchange — the small talk that gushed from my lips, his smile and frailty — was simply that he warmly and paternally received me. That brief encounter moved me deeply because I knew I was in the presence of a pastor, The Pastor.

I often have that sense when reading his papal documents. I smiled when I read “*Novo Millennio Ineunte*,” because it is clearly the work of a pastor. The Holy Father’s reflections on the diverse groups of pilgrims particularly caught my eye:

“I have been impressed this year by the crowds of people that filled Saint Peter’s Square at the many celebrations. 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.”

Those are the words of a pastor who saw with his heart, who desired to know the individuals in a crowd, and who embraced all.

Christ in him

The cobbled streets of Wadowice and Krakow had once been filled with the echoes of his conversation and his prayer, but after 1978 the streets of all the earth would be paved with his Peter-like strength — the cross of Christ on his shoulders so that we could walk sure-footed in hope. The years of his pontificate were filled with clear words of Catholic teaching, courageous solidarity with the oppressed and poor, a common touch that touched us all, a youthful smile that inspired the young to follow Jesus, a hope that cancels fear.

At the time of his funeral, and in the past few weeks, have you marveled at the pictures of those Roman streets swelling beyond capacity with the family that came to bid him farewell and celebrate his beatification? Have you noticed how they all — how we

all — think of him as uncle, as father? Did you see the leaders of religions and nations who came to honor him? Have you realized that it is not just him we loved but most especially Christ in him? It was Christ who brought him to flower.

Less than a year before his death, he wrote:

“The Bishop is the sign of Christ’s presence in the world, going out to meet men and women where they are: calling them by name, helping them to rise, consoling them with the Good News and gathering them into one around the Lord’s Table ... He becomes for these people a sign that their isolation is ended, because he brings them into fellowship with Christ.” (“*Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*,” p. 157).

It is clear to me that the worldwide family members of Pope John Paul II who packed the streets of Rome in 2005 and again early this month were drawn by Christ ... whether they realized it or not. You and I must not fail to see that these millions were drawn by Christ, to Christ in Blessed John Paul II.

How many times in his 26 years as pope did we hear him say the words of the risen Christ: “Peace be with you” — “Do not be afraid.” So convinced was he that in Christ we have every-

thing that he proclaimed him in season and out of season.

This man of the 20th century allowed himself to be so completely transformed by the Gospel that in him we saw the face of Christ. Billions throughout the world responded in respect, love and faith. But make no mistake — even if they did not realize it, they were being drawn to Christ. That says something extremely important to you and me about the richness of our Catholic faith and about what Christ wants to do in and through us. We must not squander the extraordinary outpouring of grace springing from the life and death and beatification of John Paul II.

His voice still echoes through the streets of Wadowice, Krakow, Gdansk, Nova Huta, Mexico City, New York, Nairobi, Toronto, Paris, Denver, Jerusalem and Rome, calling us by name, reminding us that we are not alone, and bidding us to come home. The songs sung in those very streets, paved in stone and marble and the rock that is Peter, blend into one chorus of praise to Christ, the redeemer of the world, who made Karol Józef Wojtyła who he was.