
John Paul II. Father Lombardi: “A mentor of the peoples, a shepherd of humanity”

“A mentor of the peoples”, whose standing influenced the history of the Church and the world. Father Federico Lombardi, president of the Vatican Foundation Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI, thus defines John Paul II upon the centenary of his birth, to be celebrated by Pope Francis on 18 May with a Mass at his tomb. Follows the interview by SIR. **You have worked for three Popes, first as director of Vatican Radio and then as Director of the Press Office of the Holy See. What are your personal recollections of John Paul II?** I followed the entire pontificate of John Paul II. Ever since my first assignment as a young editor of *Civiltà Cattolica*, I was impressed by the commitment and dedication that he put into leading the first non-Italian papacy after so many centuries. I worked more closely with him in a number of Vatican-sponsored activities in 1991, in the middle of his pontificate, and I was struck by his great personality, his style in personal relationships.

I felt that I was standing before a giant, both spiritually and humanly, a personality that would leave a deep mark on history.

I was deeply impressed by his stature and by the insight that characterized his mission, faithful to the prophecy of Card. Wysinski: “You must accompany the Church into the third millennium.” John Paul II had a very strong sense of history: the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 was extremely important for him for it celebrated the history of humanity’s encounter with Christ’s redemption, and therefore due importance was to be given to that event. His pontificate transcended boundaries of time: he was elected at a very young age, and to him it was a confirmation that he had been called to play an extremely important role in the implementation of the Council, to address the problems of humanity and to overcome the great division of the world into two blocs, but always within the dimension of the faith. I was equally touched by John Paul II as a man of faith and prayer. He did not have the slightest doubt that he was to live his vocation before God, in a deep relationship with Him. Suffice it to recall the depth of his oration, the intensity of his prayer before the Blessed Sacrament every time he entered a church on one of his visits. His deep poetic “Roman Triptych” meditations in the Sistine Chapel, when he spoke of the experience of God as “first seer”, were not mere words but concrete experience:

John Paul II felt it was his vocation to serve the Church and humanity, to be carried out constantly under God's gaze and called by God.

Having been the victim of an attack at the beginning of his pontificate is evidence of the extent to which he was at the centre of major spiritual events, of the struggle between good and evil, and that his life was considered a risk by those who feared his service to the faith, freedom and world peace. **He was aware that he had a great historical responsibility, but it was lived as a vocation.** I deeply admired him and felt grateful to him for this, and with me millions of people around the world. **“Do not be afraid”, were the first words spoken after the election to the Chair of Peter. Karol Wojtyla has been the Pope of courage, even as he faced, to the very end, before the eyes of the world, the illness that ultimately caused his death. His witness has taken on even greater significance today, as we are challenged by the pandemic...** He was directly exposed to suffering, with the attack, with the intestinal cancer that was eventually cured and in his last years with Parkinson's disease. But John Paul II was always very close to the sick. In the visits that he made, even when he was in good health, he always wanted to be with the sick, to greet them one by one, thus disrupting established schedules and programmes. The disease that affected him for a long time in the last years of his life, led to questions as to whether he would be able to fulfill his ministry

under such conditions. I believe, however, that it was an element of greatness in his Magisterium: in such a boundless pontificate, the fact that the Polish Pope experienced infirmity for a very long time was not disproportionate. It was proportionate to the burden of suffering in human experience. Many people around us are living prolonged periods of illness. And in fact- I can testify to this personally from the messages I received - it prompted the heartfelt gratitude of countless elderly and sick people, comforted by the fact that the Pope was with them and among them. *His humbleness and his courage in facing suffering before the eyes of the world was never manifested, while it allowed an immeasurable community to partake in the Pope's suffering lived in the faith.* The three images of the Way of the Cross when John Paul II embraces the Cross before the last stations will remain forever impressed in my memory. **John Paul II made over 100 apostolic journeys to countries worldwide, and you were at his side. Which specific memories of those trips do you always carry with you?** Paul II inaugurated the practice of apostolic journeys, but John Paul II, thanks to the strength of his age, made it one of the most important paths of his service to the universal Church and to the proclamation of the Gospel. In over 100 journeys abroad, plus those in Italy and Rome, he was never repetitive. Every journey was different and offered something new. Even the more problematic journeys that he wanted to make were, nevertheless, an occasion for grace. His witness and his charism in communicating captivated people from the most diverse regions of the world. I cherish special memories especially of his journeys that took place in the nineties, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

He presented himself as "mentor of the nations", with great charisma

each time he spoke to a different people inviting them to a renewed vocation for freedom, emanating from his identity. He valued the innermost dignity of every people and challenged them to rediscover the importance of their historical, religious and cultural heritage. I have never seen, neither in a person nor in my studies, such an influential personality in evangelization accomplished under the banner of dignity, identity and vocation that every people is called to offer for establishing the "whole family of peoples", as he defined humanity in his speech to the UN. Every nation has its own identity which it can draw on to contribute to the common journey of humanity. John Paul II's unique way of expressing this message reached out to the peoples who had recovered their freedom after having suffered oppression. That is how he himself had experienced the history of Poland, of his homeland. Not only did he experience it for Poland, he also helped us experience it with all the other peoples he met. **In 1985 John Paul II inaugurated the practice of World Youth Days. He had a special harmony, reciprocated, with the young people, but he allowed no room for complacency. In fact he called them to meet the "high measure" of Christian life with corresponding fullness. Is it still needed, 35 years later?** It was clear that he was a Pope with a personal experience of pastoral activity with young people, already as a young priest in Poland. He knew what it meant to go canoeing, camping, hiking in the mountains with young people. His genius led him to invent the World Youth Days, a powerful proposal precisely because young people understood him and perceived him as someone who entered their lives with the knowledge of their youth years, the time when they were discovering their place in the world, with the infinite possibilities of inherent service. *John Paul II always made great proposals to the young, which were demanding in human, moral and religious terms. This is the way of carrying out pastoral work with young people: proposing great things to them, not limiting oneself to trivial or superficial horizons.* He was able to express it with dedication and conviction, and the youth felt encouraged: they all appreciated his message and understood that they were called to self-respect, to live up to their dignity and potentialities. That is why John Paul II was a role model for generations of young people who grew up with him and remained attached to him. The tradition of WYDs was then taken up by his successors: Benedict XVI joined the itinerary of the Days admiring and acknowledging them as an occasion for vitality that was very important for the Church, and Francis continued along this line, culminating in a Synod dedicated to them. **Karol**

Wojtyla was a Pope, later a Saint, who changed the face of the Church as well as history, making a decisive contribution to the demolition of the walls, not only on an ecumenical and interreligious level but also on a geopolitical one. What remains of his legacy today? John Paul II was a great harbinger of freedom, peace and dignity, profoundly concerned with the historical circumstances in which he lived, most notably the situation of peoples under oppression by East European regimes. Yet his message spread to the peoples of Africa, who called him "brother", and to all the peoples he met. His immense global stature led to an impressive number of countries asking to establish diplomatic relations with the Holy See.

He was a shepherd of the whole of humanity,

whose global outreach could also be seen in his use of local idioms. He played a key role with great courage, in his efforts for world peace and for inter-religious dialogue - suffice it to recall the great meeting of prayer for peace in Assisi - and in his opposition to all wars, that are always a misguided and wrong way to seek a solution to problems.

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