

On the Passing of John Paul the Great
By Father John Corapi

A great athlete has run his last race. A great teacher has taught his final class. A great poet has lived his greatest masterpiece. A great warrior has fought his last battle. Pope John Paul II has died. In his life and in his death he has, however, left us a rich legacy.

The first time I remember thinking of him as John Paul the Great was in seminary in the late 1980s. The Director of Priestly Formation, a good priest and scholar, Fr. David Liptak, used to regularly speak of the Holy Father in those terms, both to us, and in his newspaper columns in the Archdiocese of Hartford's newspaper. There were few of us who wouldn't have agreed with him, then and now.

The Holy Father's gifts and accomplishments are too many to enumerate here. That has been done and will be done for years to come.

What is his greatest accomplishment? What did he teach us that was most important? Everyone will have their own ideas about it. I'll tell you mine, since everyone else these days are telling us theirs, as it should be.

Pope John Paul II was a contemplative in action. He taught us, more than anything else, that prayer really is the soul of the apostolate. His prodigious accomplishments in the ecclesial, as well as the secular sphere, were enabled and empowered by the force of his interior life. He was a man of prayer, a man of deep contemplative prayer. He was a Carmelite at heart, and he had learned his lessons well from the great doctors of prayer, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, among others.

He knew that the true purpose of human existence is union with God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, a divine artist, sculpting Christ within us unto the glory of God our Father. One must be well disposed, malleable, and open to the action of grace for this to take place. Humility is the key that opens the door to the treasure room of such grace. John Paul was an incredibly gifted man, and an incredibly humble man.

All of the strength and power that impelled him around the world several times over, all of the intellectual and spiritual energy that enabled him to write encyclical after encyclical and apostolic letter after apostolic letter came from his union with God. It was this union, effected through an intense life of prayer, that gave him the grace that, building on his nature, left aides and reporters gasping for breath trying to keep up with him all those years.

He had a deep, simple devotion and relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary. She walked with him every step of his life, from the early years when he painfully lost his own mother, then his brother, and his father. This good Mother was always with him in his darkest moments. She drew him gradually and inexorably into conformity with her Son, Jesus Christ. It was his oneness with Jesus, and Him crucified, that enabled Karol Wojtyla to soar to the greatest heights of human and Christian achievement.

Mary led him to draw close to Jesus in the holy Eucharist. He spent many hours with his Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. Every day the celebration of Mass and adoration and prayer filled him with the power he needed to be what God needed him to be for the Church and the world at a decisive moment in history.

We know his greatness in virtue of his accomplishments, for surely you can tell the tree by its fruit. The amount of good fruit from this son of Poland and the Church is astounding, and inspiring, to behold.

It is one thing to know the tree by the fruit, but what enabled the tree to grow as it did. It was prayer, and when I say prayer I do not mean merely vocal prayer, although that is very essential. I mean a life rooted in virtue, a life spent discerning and doing God's will, rather than one's own. A life that in the end must be a crucified life, a life spent in service of others. This sounds like much less than it is. To keep going when you are so tired you cannot hardly keep your eyes open, to keep going in the face of criticism and rejection, to keep going "in season and out of season, convenient or inconvenient." This is what saints do: they exercise heroic virtue. Heroic virtue, more than anything, is how the Church determines if one deserves the honor of canonization.

Pope John Paul II was given to us as a great gift by God at a decisive moment in history, both for the Church and the world. He accomplished many things, but one must reason from the effects (the fruit) back to the cause in order to truly discern the greatest lesson to be learned from his life.

His life of great active achievement was enabled and empowered by his intense life of prayer. John Paul II was a contemplative in action. Like his beloved daughter and friend, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, he knew that the source of all apostolic fruitfulness and accomplishment is a life rooted in prayer, a life so one with Jesus Christ that he would have to cry out with St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me...I live, and move, and have my being in Christ."

This is the lesson, the true lesson, we must take with us as we say goodbye to our Holy Father. The greatest tribute we can pay to him is to live as he lived. Live a life close to Mary, praying the Rosary each day as John Paul II did, drawing close to Jesus in the Eucharist. Become one with the Lord and through the power of His Spirit allow Him to do great things through you.

Trust, trust with all your heart, that Jesus will empower you to achieve great things the same way He enabled a humble polish laborer, Karol Wojtyla, to rise to the heights as one of the greatest popes and greatest men of all time.

Praised be Jesus Christ!

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