

DAY THREE

A Message for America

Coming Together in the Spirit

In early October 1979, John Paul II made his first pastoral visit as pope to the United States. For seven days, he gave us a great model for communicating the Good News to our society. He was a messenger of joy, good humor and respect for all. He made us feel good about our identity as human beings, as Americans and as Catholics.

One image continues to glow in my memory: the image of a happy man who passed his happiness on to others.

Deeply affirmed himself, he affirmed others with his love and steady smile. He sparked celebration and joy wherever he went, and crowds spontaneously broke into songs and laughter whenever he came near. Unexpected humor flowed from him, very comfortably, even on the most solemn occasions....

He did not come across as a negative, hand-wringing moralist because his central message was always positive: the good news of God's love for every human being without distinction. By embracing this truth in his own person, the pope seemed to make millions understand—perhaps for the first time—that the good news is actually good.¹

It was gray and cloudy when the pope landed at Boston's

Logan International Airport. An enormous crowd had already assembled on Boston Common, the large park near the center of Boston where Pope John Paul II would celebrate a late afternoon Mass. While the pope's motorcade was en route from the airport, the immense crowd waiting anxiously on the common.

Excitement was mounting all over the park and it was beginning to rain. I heard the distant roar of the police motorcycles leading the motorcade. Enthusiasm shot through the crowd like electricity. Some sections of the crowd could already see the pope and were cheering wildly.

The whirling sound of a helicopter drew my eyes up through the rain into the skies. The police helicopter was apparently hovering over the pope's car... The pope finally appeared waving and smiling.... "I want to greet all Americans without distinction," he told the jubilant umbrella-dotted crowd. "I want to tell you that the pope is your friend and a servant of your humanity."

The roar of the crowd indicated that Americans would certainly regard him in the friendliest way possible. Warmed by John Paul II's affirming voice, his genuine esteem for all, and his humorous comment that America is beautiful, "even when it's raining," the Boston crowd seemed even to like the rain!²

During this visit, so often marked by joy and goodwill, one saw in the pope's style of evangelization traces of Vatican II. The documents of the Second Vatican Council suggest a holistic view of our evangelizing mission as Christians. Evangelization today is concerned not only with the "saving of souls" but with the total well-being—body and soul—of all human beings.

Vatican II's celebrated document, "The Church in the Modern World," begins with the concerns of all

humanity: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted...are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.”³ John Paul was clearly in tune with such sentiments when he proclaimed at Boston Common the already quoted greeting: “The pope is your friend and the servant of your humanity.”

Respecting and affirming what is good in a nation’s unique history and culture is an important quality of the true evangelist today. Pope John Paul conveyed this kind of respect toward the United States in his homily on the Boston Common:

On this first day of my visit, I wish to express my esteem and love for America itself, for the experience that began two centuries ago and that carries the name “United States of America”; for the past achievements of this land and for its dedication to a more just and human future; for the generosity with which this country has offered shelter, freedom and a chance for betterment to all who come to its shores; and for the human solidarity that impels you to collaborate with all other nations so that freedom may be safeguarded and full human advancement made possible. I greet you, America the Beautiful.⁴

Opening Prayer

Gracious God and Creator of all, help us to embrace and take pride in the goodness of our heritage as a people, while correcting our failures as well. Help us to become more joyful communicators of the gospel and of the good news of God’s love for all. In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, lead us to show concern for the total well-being of all our sisters and brothers. May the

Holy Spirit guide us to be generous in building up our society so that no one's genuine needs go unmet. Like Jesus, may we come to serve, not to be served. Amen.

RETREAT SESSION THREE

Everywhere he went during his visit to the United States, Pope John Paul II showed warm and genuine respect for the history and culture of the United States. He could comfortably do this perhaps because he was a person who, without apology, took great pride in his own culture and history—and could therefore encourage the same for every other nation he visited.

He demonstrated his genuine love for his Polish heritage with special drama more than fifty years ago—on the day of his first Mass as a priest, November 2, 1946—the day after his ordination by Cardinal Sapieha. The place he chose for his first Mass celebration was the crypt of Saint Leonard under Cracow's Wawel Cathedral. The cathedral and its crypt are rich in Polish history. The kings of Poland were crowned and buried there. By having his first Mass there, the pope said, "I wanted to express my spiritual bond with the history of Poland, a history symbolized by the hill of Wawel."⁵

By unabashedly embracing his own national heritage, John Paul helps us to do the same. His action suggests that we do not receive God's love and care as disembodied souls or as abstractions, but as distinct human individuals fashioned by a unique personal and cultural history. Pope John Paul II wanted to take this approach with every human being he met. He sought to love and embrace each person as a unique human being who developed from a precise personal history.

In a sense, John Paul's love for youth was a part of this picture—a part of his respectful attitude for human beings of all classes. The world of youth, of course, is a unique culture in many ways. Throughout his ministry as priest, bishop and pope, John Paul II has always taken the culture of youth seriously and given it special respect and attention.

The World Youth Days he sponsored with great success in cities around the globe have demonstrated this. The World Youth Day held in Rome during the Great Jubilee Year 2000, for example, drew two million young people. For John Paul, the notion that youth are the hope of the future is not just an empty slogan, but a profound reality that deserves our greatest attention.

During John Paul's homily on Boston Common, he was careful to include a special message for American youth. "Again and again," he said, "I find in young people the joy and enthusiasm of life, a searching for truth and for the deeper meaning of the existence that unfolds before them in all its attraction and potential. Tonight I want to repeat what I keep telling youth: You are the future of the world, and 'the day of tomorrow belongs to you.'"⁶

Nor did the pope try to shield his audience from the hard messages of the gospel. He believed in their largeness of soul and their ability to handle the challenges Jesus sets before them. Therefore, at Boston Common, John Paul laid it before them straight:

I want to remind you of the encounters that Jesus himself had with the youth of his day. The Gospels preserve for us a striking conversation Jesus had with a young man.

We read there that the young man put to Christ one of the fundamental questions that youth everywhere ask: "What must I do...?" (Mk. 10:17),

and he received a precise and penetrating answer [“Sell what you have and give to the poor”]. “Then, Jesus looked at him with love and told him... Come and follow me” (Mk. 10:21). But see what happens: the young man, who had shown such interest in the fundamental question, “went away sad, for he had many possessions” (Mk. 10:22). Yes, he went away, and—as can be deduced from the context—he refused to accept the call of Christ...⁷

To each one of you I say therefore: heed the call of Christ when you hear him saying to you: “Follow me! Walk in my path! Stand by my side! Remain in my love!” There is a choice to be made: a choice for Christ and his way of life and his commandment of love.⁸

Two days later, October 3, 1979, Pope John Paul was again talking to youth, this time at New York’s Madison Square Garden. His words, on this occasion, touched on the great theme we addressed in Retreat Session One, namely, that in Christ we all find the key to our meaning as human beings. Jesus is the model and blueprint of the fully developed human being. Jesus is the answer to the question: What is my true meaning, my true role, as a human being? In the pope’s own words:

Dear young people...I invite you today to look to Christ.

When you wonder about the mystery of yourself, look to Christ who gives you the meaning of life.

When you wonder what it means to be a mature person, look to Christ who is the fullness of humanity.

And when you wonder about your role in the future of the world and of the United States, look to Christ. Only in Christ will you fulfill your potential as an American citizen and as a citizen of the world community.⁹

Later the same day, the pope came to give a major address to a large crowd at Battery Park on the southern tip of Manhattan. It was raining heavily upon the large crowd awaiting the pope's arrival. Amazingly, the drenching rain stopped just as the pope's motorcade arrived.

The Statue of Liberty stood in the distance across the bay. This was important because the pope was about to make good use of this great American emblem. In his various trips, Pope John Paul II has shown a genius for using national symbols to help each nation see its best ideals and to strive to fulfill them. He did this especially well on this occasion:

Dear friends,...my visit to your city would not be complete without coming to Battery Park, without seeing Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty in the distance. Every nation has its historical symbols. They may be shrines or statues or documents; but their significance lies in the truths they represent to the citizens of a nation and in the image they convey to other nations. Such a symbol in the United States is the Statue of Liberty. This is an impressive symbol of what the United States has stood for from the beginning of its history; this is a symbol of freedom. It reflects the immigrant history of the United States, for it was freedom that millions of human beings were looking for on these shores. And it was freedom that the young republic offered in compassion. On this spot, I wish to pay homage to this noble trait of America and its people: its desire to be free, its determination to preserve freedom, and its willingness to share this freedom with others. May the ideal of liberty, of freedom, remain a moving force for your nation and for all the nations of the world....¹⁰

And though the pope had praise for American ideals, he did not shrink from confronting his listeners about the

failures of the rich and the comfortable. He had done this, for example, the previous day at Yankee Stadium. Using the gospel image of the destitute Lazarus starving outside the rich man's gate, the pope spoke out against those who would hoard their wealth and fail to extend a helping hand to those less fortunate. "Do not leave to the poor the crumbs of your feast,"¹¹ he said.

The next day, Pope John Paul II was in Chicago. Among his activities, he presided at an outdoor Mass at Five Holy Martyrs Church in the heart of the Polish community in Chicago's southwest side. It was a special opportunity to share his faith with his fellow Poles.

Many in the crowd of 200,000 wore traditional Polish dress and the entire liturgy, including the homily, was in Polish. The pope's warm and sometimes humorous comments drew affectionate laughter, as when he referred to reports that the number of Poles in this country had swollen suddenly when he took office—a reference to the jest going about that many Poles rushed to embrace their heritage publicly when their compatriot was elected to the Chair of Peter.

The pope spent the next two days, October 6 and 7, in Washington, D.C. A highlight there was his visit to the White House—making him the first pope ever to do so—and a meeting with President Jimmy Carter on the White House lawn.

His final appearance was on the Washington Mall, midway between the Capitol and the Washington Monument. There he reminded the country of the beauty and dignity of human life: "All human life, from the moment of conception and through all its subsequent stages is sacred, because human life is created in the image and likeness of God."¹²

For Reflection

- *How do you measure up to the pope's example of a good evangelist? Does your lifestyle accurately reflect your faith?*
- *How do you "serve the humanity" of those with whom you come in contact? How do you show concern for the total well-being of those you meet?*
- *How do you embrace your historical and cultural values? How do you show respect for the heritage of others?*
- *Are you confident in the goodness and the potential of all, especially young people? How do you express this?*

Closing Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for the blessings we have received as a nation. Help us to live out the lofty ideals for which we stand. Help us to have greater confidence in our own goodness as human beings created in your image. Strengthened by your healing love and respect for us, may we show greater compassion to those in need. May we also show love and respect for each person in their unique personal and cultural identity. In imitation of Christ, may we be friends and servants of each other's human development, as together we strive toward the full stature of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Notes

¹ Jack Wintz, "The Pope in America: Memories to Cherish," *St. Anthony Messenger*, December 1979, p. 25.

² "The Pope in America: Memories to Cherish," p. 26.

- ³ Adapted from “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (“*Gaudium et Spes*”), #1, Austin Flannery, O.P., ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Vol. 1 (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Co., 1987), p. 903.
- ⁴ *The Pope Speaks to the American Church: John Paul’s Homilies, Speeches, and Letters to Catholics in America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 7.
- ⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery: On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination* (New York: Image, 1999), p. 47.
- ⁶ *The Pope Speaks to the American Church*, p. 7.
- ⁷ *The Pope Speaks to the American Church*, p. 7.
- ⁸ *The Pope Speaks to the American Church*, p. 8.
- ⁹ *The Pope Speaks to the American Church*, p. 38.
- ¹⁰ *The Pope Speaks to the American Church*, p. 39.
- ¹¹ Homily at Yankee Stadium, October 2.
- ¹² “The Pope in America: Memories to Cherish,” p. 31.