

The Agonia of the Petrine Ministry: Year Twenty-Five

By Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

As the twenty-fifth anniversary of John Paul II's time as Pope is commemorated, it is important that the Catholic Community not succumb to the temptation to use the moment to romanticize the man and the office. To be Pope for twenty-five years is to be Pope for an exceptionally long period of time. While time offers its opportunities and rewards, it is always a Golgotha — a place of pain, evil, defeat and skulls. No human being can avoid the Golgotha of time regardless of his or her task in life. People's only choice is to decide how they shall respond once they are nailed to the cross of time. Will the spirit in which they live out their temporal crucifixion be that of Jesus or not — and if not, why not?

The most obvious cross that John Paul II is presently shouldering is the ever-advancing physical enfeeblement that accompanies Parkinson's disease. The less obvious but equally real cross that is his is the psychological, emotional and spiritual consequences of this degenerative illness. No one but his spiritual director and closest friends know how much mental or spiritual pain he

is experiencing due to this slowly progressive destruction of his central nervous system, a destruction that leaves the mind intact while relentlessly eating away at the body. However, any ordinary person, who wishes to, can activate his or her faculty of empathy and sense the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual gravity of living, yet slowly dying of this incurable and oftentimes torturous affliction.

So perhaps during this year when we are commemorating John Paul II's twenty-five years as Pope, spiritual realism should take precedence over spiritual romanticism and mandate that a significant portion of this time be allotted to praying for him. The spiritual traps that lurk just below the surface of pain, disease, aging and death are legion. No person knows in what frailty of character or in what fragility due to prior nurturing lies his or her spiritual Achilles' heel. No one knows the ultimate limits of the physical, mental or spiritual distress he or she can endure. When St. Therese of Lisieux, "the greatest saint of modern times," tells her sisters to remove everything from the room

with which she can commit suicide, it should be a clarion call to intensely and perseveringly pray for the sick and dying. St. Therese's blood sister, Marie, who was also a Carmelite sister in the Lisieux Carmel, at one point left Therese's infirmary room and threw herself before the statue of the Sacred Heart, pleading that Therese not lose faith because of the racking pain she was undergoing. Romanticism and triumphalism have no place at this twenty-fifth anniversary time. Service to the Servant of the servants of God is what is in order worldwide. The service of love—motivated prayers on behalf of John Paul II should define this year of commemoration.

Beyond all that has been said and as a further inducement to commemorate this year by a sincere commitment to prayer for John Paul II, let me speak a truism: No one knows what it means spiritually to be a pope, except a pope. To have a unique responsibility before God for one billion Catholic souls creates a consciousness and a conscience dynamic that are beyond the imagination of anyone to genuinely fathom. Most Catholics





at one time or another probably hypothesize in their own minds what they would do “if I were pope!” But, this is just so much child’s play. The multiplicity of conundrums, complexities, ambivalences and seemingly intractable problems that a person who has absolute spiritual, theological and jurisdictional authority in the Church has to weigh and make decisions on are so overwhelming that no right-minded human being could approach the task except in extreme humility and in “fear and trembling.”

But, it may be argued that the presidents of countries or of multinational corporations face the same challenges in their jobs. They do not! States and corporations are totally perishable temporal entities concerned only with temporal results. The decisions that the Successor of Peter is required to make always have to be made consistent with eternal and imperishable outcomes — the salvation of souls. A “Yes”, a “No” or silence emanating from a Pope pierces Catholics’ souls as nothing else can, even when Catholics disagree with Peter. This means that if the pope is wrong about a matter on which he speaks non-infallibly, if he is in error about the propriety of a pastoral practice or if he is mistaken about the spiritual health of a Church discipline, the souls and lives of people could be severely damaged or Catholics could be psychologically or spiritually driven out of the Church. Any pope who is a serious spiritual person, as all modern popes have been, knows this. It is one of the reasons why the room in which the pope dresses for the first time in his white cassock immediately after his election is called “The Room of Tears”. Certainly every modern pope in the depth of his soul is acutely alive to what is meant by the saying “If sheep are lost because of the shepherd, can the shepherd be saved?”

No person on this planet has the absolute spiritual and total jurisdictional power over a human community that a modern pope does — and this power is intimately and irrevocably tied to the eternal bliss or eternal damnation of the pope and those to whom he is given to minister. But, any contemporary Successor to Peter is quite cognizant of the implications embedded in the observation, that while the Church is indefectibly holy, Her personnel is not. Human life in general and each human life in particular is vulnera-

ble to ignorance, concupiscence, self-deception, evil, pride, fear, selfishness, uncertainty, self-righteousness, etc. with some or all of these blurring a person’s vision of God, self, others, truth and the Gospel. Who truly knows even himself, or the limits of her perception? Who truly is aware of the spring within the spring that motivates a particular course of action? Rudyard Kipling once wrote a poem that went in part like this:

If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you...

Then you are a man my son.

Another interpretation of the same reality is this:

If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you...

Then, perhaps you don’t fully comprehend the situation my son.

It is a soul-searing task to be the one with absolute spiritual authority and total jurisdictional power over a billion souls. During his time as Pope, John Paul II has made and has permitted the making by others of decisions that have seriously affected an uncountable number of souls. From his position on artificial birth control to his allowance of female alter servers, from his outspoken condemnation of both Iraqi wars to his clandestine but significant interference in the operation of a sovereign nation-state (Poland), from his excoriation of what he termed “savage capitalism” to his knighting of the non-Catholic media mogul Rupert Murdoch, from his unwillingness to dialogue with Catholic theologians of the highest intellectual station who disagree with him to his willingness to allow the Sacraments, especially the Mass, to be used to promote messages of private revelation across the planet, from his onerously tightening the requirements for the granting of laicization from the sacerdotal priesthood to his allowing married Episcopal and Lutheran men to be ordained to the priesthood in the Roman Rite, from his not retiring when no longer physically capable of overseeing the bureaucracy acting in his name to his witnessing to the world that

infirmity does not negate one’s humanity or diminish one’s intrinsic dignity, from his sublime Encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, to his promoting the cause of St. Faustina, all this and much more have impacted souls and lives and decisions of countless numbers of his fellow creatures. Who can say with certitude if this impact is for good or for ill on individual souls and on the mission Christ gave to His Church? No one knows! However, the pope has to live and die with the realization that he and he alone made these decisions and is responsible before God for them. Make no mistake; this is the agony of the Petrine ministry.

Does any pope die in peace? Again, who knows? The reality of death, like the reality of God, is in the end beyond the capacity of words to grasp. But whatever death is, or for that matter life, it is not and should never be treated primarily as a political phenomenon through which people at various points on the political or religious-political spectrum make publicity points for themselves, their causes or their organizations. When John F. Kennedy is assassinated on November 22, 1963, literally hundreds of millions of words are spoken or written about him via the mass media. No political stone in his life is left unturned. No question concerning his personal life goes unasked. No speculation regardless of how far removed from reality cannot be entertained — with one telling exception! In spite of the immensity of the coverage and the commentary, the questioning and the conjecturing, one question never finds its way into the secular world’s media: “Where is he now?” Yet, life lived and interpreted with blinders on concerning what was referred to in the past as “the last things” — death, judgment, heaven and hell — is life lived and interpreted in a way that is not fully human. Indeed, it is life lived and interpreted through a tragically unserious lens. The values of secular superficiality couched in the vernacular of religion should not be the values that direct this twenty-fifth anniversary.

No pope, of course, will know until after his death whether what he did or did not do as pope worked for or worked against the salvation of souls and the coming of the Kingdom of God. In time no pope can truly ascertain if a decision, or lack of a decision, has built up the Church or torn down the Church, has helped souls or damaged souls.

But, most popes are aware that their decisions, whether of word or deed, must and will be judged by their effect on the eternal destiny of the Catholic men and women in their spiritual care, as well as by their fruits vis-à-vis the salvation of all humanity.

John Paul II from all outward appearance struggles mightily to fulfill his obligations as he understands them in the Petrine Ministry. Let us not use this twenty-fifth anniversary of his Pontificate to evoke more of the banality of secular-world hurrahs for the man. A pope, perhaps more than anyone else, understands and feels at such an hour as this how dreadfully vacuous is worldly acclaim. And, please, out of a sense of simple human decency, let us not exploit this occasion to give credence or add spice to our preferred brand of Catholic theology. Let us instead, as mature Catholic people, enfold John Paul II with our continuing prayers during this special time in his life.

Lest any of my readers think I am here being a "Dies Irae-Catholic" or an other-worldly, pre-Vatican II pietist, I would ask only that they visit John Paul II in their minds and ask him what he would prefer for his twenty-fifth anniversary as Pope: another twenty books about himself, adulatory editorials in *The New York Times* and *The London Times*, arguments among Christian theo-political ideologues over who supports which of his encyclicals, talking-TV-heads droning on with trite evaluations of his papacy — or prayer?

Let us Catholics give John Paul II more than tinsel-wrapped kudos for the twenty-fifth anniversary of his Pontificate. Let us give him and through him the whole world something of eternal value. Let us give him and the world the witness of a serious and caring Catholic Church united in helping each other pass over from the cross of time to the peace of Eternity. ■

Closing the Year of the Rosary

By Rev. Michael Wensing S.T.L.

By the time you receive this issue of *Vocations and Prayer* a number of parishes and dioceses will have closed the Year of the Rosary proclaimed in October of 2002 (Pope John Paul marked the 24th anniversary of his election Oct. 16, 2002, by signing his apostolic letter, "Rosarium Virginis Mariae"). In my diocese, for instance, the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, which falls on October 7, was the occasion for the beginning of a Novena to our Lady of the Rosary which ended on October 15. Besides diocesan celebrations at our Cathedral to open and close the Novena, each parish was encouraged to pray publicly and daily the rosary plus a special novena prayer for nine days. This prayer is included at the end of this article. Recall that a most ancient biblical type or paradigm for the novena is the period of nine days between the Ascension and Pentecost (Acts 1-2) when our Mother, Mary, was with the Apostles and other disciples in prayer (Acts 1:14) and then dramatically received an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the tenth day (Acts 2:1-4). Anyone can dedicate a novena of prayer and the rosary for nine days at any time of the year for a special intention or for God's will in a particular matter. The opening nine days of Advent might be one of the most appropriate times annually to pray with Mary such a novena, for it is a time of waiting, preparation in prayer, and expectation of a dramatic coming. Advent etymologically is related to the Latin phrase of the Lord's Prayer "Adveniat regnum tuum" - your kingdom come. It is a time of the "already" and "not yet" during Advent. We prepare for the celebration of the "coming" in history already of Jesus, born at Bethlehem. And we continuously pray for the dramatic full realization of the coming kingdom in the "parousia" — the second coming of Jesus at the end of time.

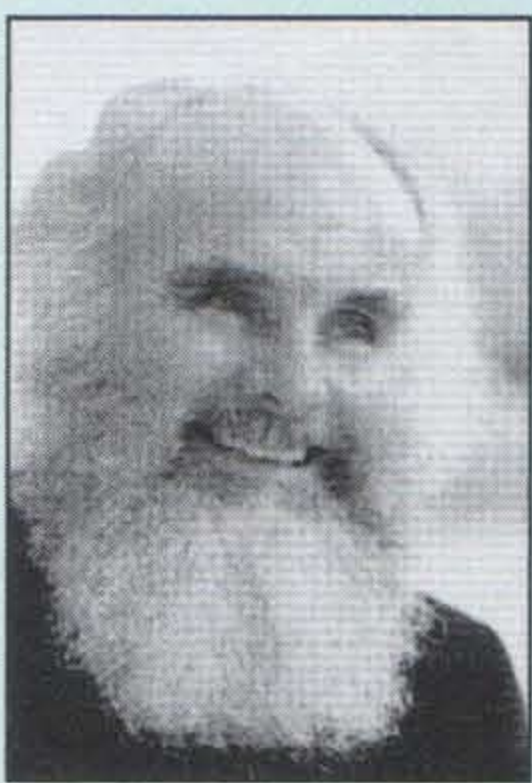
Because we draw to a close a dedicated

year of the Rosary for the universal church, a particular domestic church (each household), or parish church, can choose their best nine day period to close the year with such a novena. It is a good way to re-emphasize the power of the rosary as Christian devotional prayer and a good time to re-teach the new mysteries proclaimed in the apostolic letter. The celebration of All Saints on November 1 emphasized the communion of saints in prayer with us and the power of the Queen of all the Saints, Mary, in her intercession for us to her Son.

In his apostolic letter Pope John Paul II asked everyone to recite the rosary frequently, lovingly, and with the knowledge that its prayers link them with Mary and lead them to Jesus. Then he wrote of five new mysteries, the Mysteries of Light, surrounding particular manifestations of Jesus as light of the world during his adult earthly ministry, an area of emphasis missing in the previous list of mysteries. Thus new catechisms for children are now calling these "The Five Mysteries of Light" and give a short list for easy memorization: 1. The Baptism of Jesus, 2. The Wedding at Cana, 3. The kingdom of God, 4. The Transfiguration, 5. The Eucharist. Thus we are now in possession of twenty mysteries of the Rosary and a new proposal of particular days of the week for the praying of each set of five. The Joyful Mysteries are to be prayed on Monday and Saturday. Saturday introduces a new change of mysteries.

Whereas it was a custom to pray the Glorious Mysteries, with its week-end emphasis on the Resurrection and the concluding two mysteries focusing on Mary on her day (the Assumption and Coronation), we now pray the Joyful Mysteries which contain both a Christological and a Marian focus combined in every mystery. For instance, the Incarnation (of Jesus) happens with the Annunciation and Mary's "Fiat".

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