

Encountering Pope John Paul II

By Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

When John Paul II became Pope, I was a 38 year old Catholic layman whose primary vocation was conducting conferences on Jesus' nonviolence. When John Paul II died I was a 64 year old Catholic priest whose primary vocation was directing retreats on the Nonviolent Jesus and His Way of Nonviolent love of friends and enemies. During the 26 intervening years of his pontificate, I knew him—as most of the world did—as an abstract person garnered from a multiplicity of media images and from his writings. His public persona and public witness did of course give access at some level to the human being behind the images and words, but by necessity, the access was limited and controlled. Biographies were written but again biographies on paper are as distant from the actual person as the word “sun” is from the gigantic nuclear furnace 92 million miles away around which the earth revolves.

However, through the Power of Providence, there did occur an instant in time when I concretely encountered the flesh and blood person, Pope John Paul II. It was October 11, 1998 at the Canonization of Edith Stein, known in religious life as Sr. Teresia Benedicta a Cruce.

Within the incomprehensible mystery of existence, it happened that my daughter, Teresia Benedicta McCarthy, became the official Church miracle for the person after whom she was named. Because of this I was invited to be one of the twenty concelebrants with the Pope of the Mass of Canonization for St. Edith Stein, St. Teresia Benedicta a Cruce, at St. Peter's in Rome.

Here John Paul II and I met face to face, eye to eye, hand to hand in total silence for about 20 seconds. But, silence can communicate what words cannot. Silence has a language of its own—a way of letting a person know another's hopes and faith, struggles and sorrows, loves and cares, failures and fears. When I looked into John Paul's eyes and he mine, what came to consciousness was not “This is the Pope, this is the Successor of St. Peter,” or “This is a world renowned personality,” or “This is a conservative theologian,” or “This is the denouncer of both totalitarian communism and ‘savage capitalism,’” or “This is the religious leader who condemned the war in Iraq with the same vigor he condemned abortion.” No such thoughts occurred to me. When I met John Paul II face to face, eye to eye, hand to hand, the truth I beheld in that silence was “*This is a*

man absolutely committed to Christ-God, who lives in painful solidarity with the agonizing plight of suffering humanity.” Later, I would express my face to face encounter with him with the words: “Here is a man perseveringly and arduously struggling to understand, and to illuminate for others, the dialogue—mediated through Jesus Christ—between the God of Mercy in His Eternal Glory and humanity in its present pain.”

Can all this be captured in a mere 20 seconds? “Yes,” and in far less than 20 seconds. A silent encounter can communicate an ocean of truth in a passing glance or a split second glare.

Much has been written in the secular media of John Paul II being a “man of peace.” No doubt his desire for peace personally and for peace universally was as deep and as sincere as anyone's. But, what was never said in the secular media was that John Paul II believed there was no genuine avenue to peace except through Jesus Christ and His Way, which always included accepting the cross of voluntary self-sacrificial love on behalf of others. Accepting this cross daily in union with the crucified Christ, in communion with the crucified Christ and in imitation of the crucified Christ was the “sine qua non” for authentic peace—for the Father's Kingdom to come, for the Father's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. John Paul was indeed a “man of peace,” but it was peace through the grace of the Cross of Christlike love toward each and all, regardless of their history, culture or woundedness. It was not “Peace! Peace!” as the world says, “peace.”

Therefore, although being well aware with whom he was dealing, John Paul reached out to all: the great and the “insignificant,” the lame and the rap dancers, sophisticated white collar thieves and brutal murders, the indifferent and the hopeless. No one, regardless of how wounded they were by life or history, was beyond his touch. But, what is equally true is that no one he touched could leave his presence and not know his truth: “There can be no valid and lasting peace, no conquering of evil and death, except through trust in Jesus Christ and His Way.” This caused many people in the academic, political and economic communities to label him “Christocentric.” They meant the term pejoratively. I am certain he would have embraced it wholeheartedly because Jesus Christ and His Way, which centered around His cross of life-giving—not life-taking—love,





Fr. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy with Pope John Paul II on October 11, 1998.

was John Paul's whole life. This was his whole life for the simple reason that Jesus Christ was God incarnate and only God has the wisdom and power, and only God's Way possess the wisdom and power, to rescue humanity from the prison of evil, suffering and death in which it is impotently thrashing from year to year, hour to hour, millennium to millennium.

Do I think John Paul II made mistakes? Yes, even big mistakes. Do I think he did not address problems in the Church that needed addressing? Yes, serious problems. But such matters are the stuff of which fragile and fallible human existence is composed. Judgments in application may cloud or clarify the implications of one's fundamental truth—but John Paul II's two pronged fundamental truth—Christ-God and His cross of merciful love freely chosen in solidarity with suffering humanity—was never obscure.

Many stars from the secular heavens came to Rome for the Pope's funeral, ostensibly in order to honor this "man of peace." But, how many of these passing lights in the night accepted John Paul's truth regarding the Way to peace? This is why Jesus warned His followers to be wary "when the world speaks well of you" (Lk 6:26). The status of John Paul II in history will not be determined by what the various princes of this world and their mass media agents think

about him, nor by what the history books, secular or Christian, of this world say about him. John Paul II's place in history will be determined by what he did to positively move forward the only history that counts, but the one that the world cares little about, namely, salvation history. His place in this history will be determined like that of every other Christian, by the grace of God and by his fidelity in his moment to moment living to that "new commandment" in which "the entire Law of the Gospel is contained, to love one another as I have loved you" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1970, 2288).

With all this in mind, perhaps an appropriate way to conclude this little reflection on Pope John Paul II is by relating two factual vignettes from his life that en flesh what has been said here.

First, the Pope prepared a homily, that he never delivered. He had planned to present it—either in person or with the assistance of another—on the First Sunday after Easter, Mercy Sunday. But, of course, he died the day before. In it he prays:

"Lord, who with your death and resurrection revealed the love of the Father; we believe in you and with faith we repeat to you today—Jesus, I trust in you, have pity on us and on the entire world."

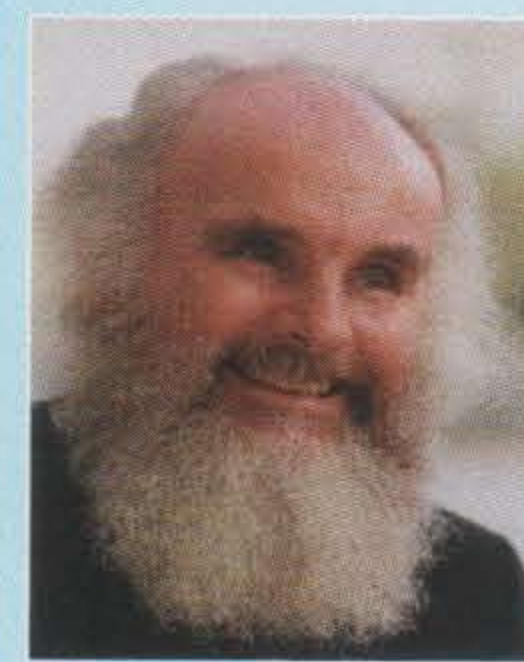
Pondered diligently, all of John Paul II

is in those words.

Second, just before I met him on October 11, 1998, a bishop told the few people present not to speak with the Pope since this day had been a fatiguing one for him. When the Pope entered, he appeared frail, walking ever so slowly to the reception area. I, like the others present, respected the request not to speak with him due to his weakened condition. So, as noted at the opening of this article, for about 20 seconds we met face to face, eye to eye, hand to hand in communicative silence. Then we parted. A couple of seconds later as I was walking away, I felt a tug on my arm. I turned around—and there stood the Pope. He would have had to walk approximately 10 feet quickly before grabbing my arm. We again met eye to eye, face to face, but this time he spoke two words in English: "Thank you!" Then, he slowly turned around and very cautiously made his way back to the formal reception area.

I think I know what his "Thank you!" was about, but I will not be able to verify that until Eternity. So on that matter, nothing shall be said. But, of this I am certain. It was a Herculean effort for him to move that far that quickly as I was walking away from him. I also know that it was the love of Christ and his people that compelled him to make that effort and to intentionally break with formality, fatigue and infirmity in that moment. So here on a microscopic level we see proclaimed by action that which he was consistently proclaiming by word on a world stage: Christ-God and His merciful solidarity with suffering humanity made visible through living the cross—the cross of self sacrificial Christlike love on behalf of others.

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A Design Of Providence

John Paul II,
the suffering Servant of the suffering servants of God,

A man
singled-out of nothingness
not by careless randomness
but by Meticulous Care,
to magnify
unwanted eternal truth,
to give the world
Christic Love
like the powerful give arms.

A pope
who knew that
the Word that
has been on stage
since the opening act
must be spoken
before the curtain falls.

A person
who would,
as the poet Slowacki prophesied,
“boldly like God
go against the swords”
—like God,
—like Christ,
—like Yeshua

by proclaiming creatively
the crux of the Creating Word:
“Violence is not the Christian Way,
Violence is not the Catholic Way,
Violence is not the Way of Jesus”,
thereby leading
the Family of the Father,
out of
the allure and fatalism
of violence

via
faith in Christ and His Inextinguishable Love,
to the Truth:

“LOVE CONQUERS ALL.”

(Rev.) Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

