

John Paul II – “Follow Me”

Gregory N. Smith

Follow me. Two words hold the key to understanding the message of Pope John Paul II, according to one of his closest collaborators.

But these words, used by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in his funeral homily, are not John Paul's. They belong to Jesus, who says “follow me” no less than 18 times in the gospels.

The late pope sought no personal disciples. For him, “follow me,” meant only one thing: follow Christ.

Many modern heroes cry out “look at me.” John Paul proclaimed “look at Him!” Even by means of his personal charisma, the pope directed our attention to Christ. He told those gathered in Toronto for World Youth Day in 2002 to listen for Jesus speaking to them with “his gentle and urgent voice,” just like the first disciples.

To even begin to understand the impact and appeal of the late pope, one must turn to look at Jesus Christ. If the suggestion sounds odd or pious, it can only be because poor preachers or Sunday school teachers have painted a pale Christ, stripped of his compelling appeal and radical message. John Paul was convinced that his chief task was to reintroduce the world—especially youth—to Christianity's founder.

For him, to know Christ was to know how to live and how to love, in good times and bad. It meant being loved, by God himself. Knowing Christ was like breathing the air of the mountains that Karol Wotyla loved to hike; there was nothing stuffy about it.

No words could rival what the pope's actions taught about Christ. John Paul embraced his would-be assassin, accepted disability with good humour, carried on with determination and patience through pain and illness. Right to the moment of his noble and very public death, he was “a living gospel for all to hear,” in the words of the Mass celebrated on the feast days of apostles.

These actions were not original, but imitated Christ, who forgave his executioners and made his death a symbol of ultimate victory, much as the dying pope did. Again, John Paul's wordless “follow me” meant only “follow the one I am following.”

Analyzing the incredible outpouring of devotion we saw this week in Rome without reference to Jesus is like trying to fathom Pavarotti or Casals without knowing music.

An outpouring it certainly was. Nothing in my experience begins to compare, not even the papal visit to Vancouver of 1984. Picture downtown streets as B.C. Place empties after a football game—and then imagine that the crowd continues to surge past for four full days.

Everyone I talked to had a story. A hasty flight from Medicine Hat. Fifteen hours from Sicily by bus and boat—and an immediate return. After nine hours in line, one young man said simply “how could I not say a final good-bye?”

But the big story was not fondness—it was faith. At Mass in St. Peter’s on Thursday, a senior bishop recounted how he’d met a young man the night before who pleaded to be admitted. The bishop explained that it had proved impossible to accommodate everyone. Still he pleaded.

“I came here for the young people’s celebration during the Jubilee year 2000,” he said. “I was a convinced atheist and I came to mock.

“But in the Pope’s presence I was moved to think—and I found my faith.”

Touched by the story, the bishop admitted the man to St. Peter’s through a side door. He knelt beside the pope’s body and sobbed for ten minutes. “Grazie, grazie, grazie” was all he said.

The lasting contribution of John Paul to the church and the world will not be determined by how well or how often he is remembered. It will be seen in the sprouting of the seeds of faith he planted. In this sense, his work has not ended but is just beginning.

The undeniable sense of loss felt by many of us is greatly tempered when we realize that the good news the pope announced—messages of hope, of peace, of love, and of human dignity—did not originate with him and cannot die with him.

Understanding his pontificate in this way leads to important consequences. If the late pope’s appeal comes from his Master and not his mastery of communication, then his death does not mean the loss of an irreplaceable figure. If he has shown his successor, other bishops, priests and indeed every Christian the power of the undiluted gospel, then the phenomena of his pontificate will continue.

Indeed, if he has shown all people of good will the need to live their beliefs and convictions even against strong social currents, then the renewal of societies he championed will continue.

This is the challenge that issues from the life and death of John Paul II: to admire or to imitate?

The challenge confronts, of course, every Catholic. Will we respond by leaving the “cafeteria line” of individualistic faith, and embrace the uncompromising doctrines that were the hallmark of this pontificate?

Will bishops and priests of the third millennium be formed by the example of the pope, and strive with all their energy to live the gospel without compromise, preaching as much by what they do as by what they say?

No less does the challenge affect other Christian churches, facing ever-greater social pressures on their systems of belief. Will the legacy of Pope John Paul—whom a Protestant friend of mine

called “the best Evangelical I ever knew”—encourage them to maintain unpopular positions that are faithful to the gospel’s more difficult teachings?

Already there are signs that the Pope’s willingness to carry on a humble dialogue with the members of other faiths has borne fruit. The numerous representatives of the Jewish and Islamic communities were impossible to miss in their places of honour at his funeral; will they, too, find the courage to persevere in a difficult task?

He challenged all of us—Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Moslems, Sikhs, and all people of good will—to live our beliefs with greater charity, consistency and courage. He invited those who suffer, who fear or face death, to live their trials with serenity and purpose, as he did.

John Paul II led—by following.

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*Note to readers of **Fr. Vaverek’s selected sites**: Msgr. Gregory Smith is a fellow canonist and close friend to Rev. Gavin N. Vaverek who is the former chancellor of the Diocese of Tyler, in Texas, but is not a Monsignor, nor a doctoral student.*