

In the Heartland

Remembering Blessed John Paul II

I frequently have the opportunity to be with young people at their schools, activities, retreats, cathedral visits, etc. A feature of our gatherings is the opportunity for them to ask questions. They are not lacking in their inquisitiveness. Among other questions they ask – where do I live? What’s my favorite thing about being Bishop? Why do I like the Vikings? How old are you? Why do you wear that little red hat, the zucchetto?

Frequently asked, is how often do I see the Pope? On the occasion of the recent beatification of Pope John Paul II, I reflected upon the opportunity I have had over the years to be with the first Polish Pope. In office 26 plus years, he was the third longest serving Pope in history. Providentially, he was historically situated to be highly instrumental in the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. He took dozens of apostolic journeys including trips to remote parts of the globe. He canonized so many saints that he challenged the total number canonized by all the popes previous to him.

Because of his long tenure and relative accessibility, millions had the opportunity to have contact with him during his pontificate. I was fortunate to have direct encounters with him at the beginning of his service, midway and finally in his waning days as Pope.

The first encounter was in 1979 when I was serving as a priest secretary in the Apostolic Delegation in Washington, DC. The Apostolic Delegation at the time was the informal representation of the Holy See (Vatican) to the United States Government and the Apostolic Delegate served as well as the personal representative of the Pope to the Catholic Church in the United States.

Washington, D.C. was the last stop on the Pope’s first trip to the United States which included a speech at the United Nations, meetings with President Carter and Vice-President Mondale and, of course, the historic visit on October 4, 1979, to Iowa featuring Irish Settlement and the Mass at Living History Farms.

He stayed with us at the Apostolic Delegation, enjoyed meals and had meetings with his staff and meetings with others who had arranged appointments. In his late fifties he was vibrant and energetic. One particular incident was telling. At the conclusion of supper, he asked if there was a “micro” that could be activated to speak to the large crowds that had assembled in front of the Apostolic Delegation building on Massachusetts Avenue. Informed that such equipment was not available, he and his secretary went to the room where he was staying.

About 15 minutes later, he appeared prepared to go outside to greet the crowds personally. Archbishop Paul Marcinkus, the Vatican coordinator of the trip, stopped

him after a first flight of stairs and very directly in Italian advised the Pope not to go outside since the crowds were essentially protesters. The Pope listened carefully. He simply replied “Andiamo” – “Let us go” and went outside and won over the hearts of those gathered.

In the middle of his pontificate, I was involved with a team responsible for what was known as the “Papal Seminary Study.” In effect, it was equivalent to what is referred to as an “accreditation study.” It took relevant governing documents for seminaries and developed criteria for evaluation. The seminaries, numbering in the hundreds, were then visited by teams. The outcome was a report that noted strengths and areas where a particular seminary could improve.

Pope John Paul II himself initiated the study and asked that an aggregate report be given to him annually. Four of us from the team subsequently met with him for an hour to make the report to him in each of three years. A great deal of trepidation was felt by each of us at least the first year. What I remember is how he would listen attentively, ask probing questions and compare information coming from the study with that which he had gained in his world-wide experience.

A feature of these annual visits over three years was the invitation to concelebrate Mass with the Pope in his private chapel. We joined him at meditation during which he visibly entered into contact with his God. The Masses were all sung and included a brief reflection.

My final personal experience with the Holy Father was in December, 2004. Bishops from throughout the world are expected to make “ad limina” visits to Rome and the Holy Father approximately every five years. The group I was with, Region VIII of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, was the last group to make such a visit to him since John Paul II died on April 2, 2005.

Part of the “ad limina” was a personal meeting with the Pope. As Auxiliary Bishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis, I joined Archbishop Flynn, its archbishop, for the meeting with the Holy Father. Our private meeting lasted about 25 minutes. Although fully alert, it was obvious that it was an enormous struggle for the Pope to conduct such a meeting.

One gesture that I will always remember from that meeting was how the Holy Father made an extraordinary effort to reach across a long table to shake my hand as we prepared to leave. This further exemplified his sensitivity, personalism and his attention to those before him and his ability to connect with them.

The encounters which I had with Pope John Paul II came in the course of my given responsibilities at particular times. It afforded me an opportunity to note the very endearing human qualities experienced in subdued, daily settings. At the time, I knew they were highly privileged occasions when one sensed being with a “giant” of our times. Resting in eternal peace with the Savior he served without any hesitation,

history now embraces him and through him provides a light of hope and assurance of God's ongoing Providence.