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**Mass in Memory of POPE JOHN PAUL II**  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Kansas City , Missouri  
Tuesday, April 5, 2005

Note: *Witness to Hope, the Biography of Pope John Paul II*, was written by George Weigel in 1999, runs to almost 1000 pages!

In Catholic circles 1978 will be forever known as the year of the two new Popes. Like a meteor which briefly blazes across the night skies and is almost immediately swallowed up by overwhelming darkness, Cardinal Luciani of Venice died suddenly 25 days after his papal installation. There is little to remember of his all-too-short papacy but he coined the double name asking to be known as John Paul I. Because of his personal affection for his friend who was dubbed the "September Pope", Karol Wojtyla, the relatively unknown Cardinal Archbishop of Krakow and the choice in the second 1978 Conclave had no hesitancy in declaring that he too wished to be known as John Paul.

Perhaps more than we will ever comprehend, the personalities of these two servants of Christ and faithful proclaimers of the gospel message were fused in the individuality of the son of Poland who was to wear the Fisherman's Ring for over a quarter of a century.

More than once in his gospel meditation John the Evangelist recalled his earlier years with Christ. He was the disciple whom Jesus loved, he alone, of the twelve apostles, was there under the cross when Christ died, he, more than most others, quickly grasped the implications of the resurrection. He was selected by the dying Lord to be the guardian of Mary.

John Paul II mirrored all of these priorities during his papacy. For him there was no greater purpose in life than an intimacy with Christ which was nurtured by constant prayer and activated by a limitless charity. This was the bedrock of his teaching, the strength of his convictions, the achievement which justified all the sacrifices and the sufferings and the self-denials one gladly undertook in order to touch "the very face of God." This spirit – and it was a spiritual impulse – permeated every page of his writings and addresses – from words of advice about life to exuberant teenagers, to the more staid and logical application of the moral law to the exploding scientific possibilities of modern research.

And from John, too, he readopted Mary as the great woman in his life. Her "yes" to the divine motherhood became the pattern for his "yes" to the papacy. He emblazoned her monogram on his coat of arms and he never finished a document or a prayer without mentioning her name and, as he told us many times, she reversed their roles by becoming his protector especially on that fateful day in May, 1981 when the bullets of a would-be assassin in St. Peter's Square almost succeeded in their intention.

And then there was Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles. The *Acts of the Apostles* documents his three Missionary journeys around the Mediterranean , the known-world at the time. John Paul

would multiply his destinations bringing the name and message of Christ to continents where he was barely and not always kindly acknowledged. Paul was frustrated by the multiplicity of gods he found in Athens but John Paul has left us blueprints for respectful dialogue with other religious groups and these are gradually replacing the recriminations and the excesses of the past.

As I speak thousands of pilgrims of various nationalities are filing past the catafalque bearing the body of John Paul II. What are they looking for? What are you looking for by attending this Mass this evening? What do they feel? What do you feel? What has compelled them to wait for hours for one brief glance at a dead pope? What do they remember? A complex man, a noted intellectual with a common touch, a determined teacher, a man of prayer, a vicar of Christ, a holy priest in touch with God, a humble soul with a wry sense of humor, a compassionate bishop, a railer against injustice, a lover of the poor, a champion of freedom, a man of peace, a restorer of hope. Yes – maybe some, or none or all of these things. Maybe it is very simply our sense of loss. He is gone and we feel the poorer. How appropriate are the words of the poet John Donne, “no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

Somehow I believe that we are willing to acknowledge that he knew what we are always struggling to understand, the meaning of life and death or, better still, the meaning of life both here and hereafter.

John Paul the Second's accomplishments were considerable but did he restore Eden ? Of course not. Did he create an utopia? Of course not. In the minutes before he died Christ hung in agony between two thieves. One loved him, the other disparaged him. Could this be an image of our polarized society, our polarized culture, our polarized Church? John Paul II's successor will not be short of challenges; we have found many ways to keep evil gainfully employed and goodness woefully overextended!

In recent days the unprecedented and comprehensive coverage of the Pope's funeral and appraisals of his life in the media have given us much to ponder and assessments to evaluate.

This evening we pray for our beloved John Paul II and simply ask the kind God he served so faithfully for a lifetime to take him to his own. I have had the privilege of observing our late Holy Father at prayer in his private chapel and elsewhere on a number of occasions and I know he could confidently make the words of Job his own:

*“He, whom I shall see, will take my part; my eyes will be gazing on no stranger.”  
-- (Job 19:27a)*

I hope we are not worried about the Holy Father's salvation. You know that John Paul II canonized more saints than all the other Popes combined; with all due reverence, may I suggest that if they formed a welcoming party at the Heavenly Gates he would be inside well before Peter knew what was happening. (Peter wouldn't have minded; this was one of his successors).

As a final little meditation let me draw your attention to the way John Paul II died. Not during Holy Week, like Christ (Andrew-like\*, perhaps) so he held on till the week of the resurrection. Although he asked his attendants to read to him a description of the Via Dolorosa, the Sorrow-

ful Way , what we call the Stations of the Cross. The media made a big deal out of the fact that he missed the Stations of the Cross in the Colosseum this year. He didn't miss them; he lived them this year.

Have you noticed that this man, who spent his life powerfully proclaiming the Word of God around the world, was asked to surrender his voice as he neared death? This was another letting go as requested by the God he loved so much. And in those final days when he struggled to the window to give his voiceless blessing, I like to think that he was not only blessing us, but also waving us goodbye!

Let me share a little secret with you. If the new Pope calls me in a few weeks (hardly likely!) and asks if he can do anything for me, I have my answer ready. I will say "Your Holiness, after reading the encyclicals, pastorals, sermons and homilies of John Paul II for over 25 years and after using his annual Holy Thursday message to Priests as the basis of my Chrism Mass homily for 17 years, I would respectfully ask you to declare Pope John Paul II a Doctor of the Church." We have 33 Doctors of the Church at the present time; two are Popes – Leo in the 400s and Gregory at the end of the 500s. We need another for this new century of this new millennium.

Now if you are interested in the name of the next pope, see me after Mass and I'll give it to you. It is on a list of 117 candidates and I'm pretty sure his name will be one of them!

May God continue to bless John Paul II and each one of us.

AMEN