

The Seed of Eternity Rebels against Death: Homily at Mass Said for the Happy Repose of Pope John Paul II

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IN THE MIDST of life, we are faced with the mystery of death, with its certainty and with its uncertainty. That we shall die is certain. What is uncertain is when and how we shall die. But faith, hope, and love are indomitable in the face of the painful reality, the awesome mystery that death is. So even though we live and walk in the valley of death, we believe in the words of Zechariah, which the Church chants every morning, that in the tender compassion of our God, the rising Sun, Christ Jesus, continually shines upon us. He comes from on high to visit us, to give light to us who live and walk in darkness and the shadow dark as death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Pope John Paul II knew in a deeply personal way what it meant to live, to labor, and to walk in the valley of death. He faced the mystery of death and personal tragedy so early and so often in his life. His only sister died before he was born. His mother died when he was nine. His only brother died when he was thirteen. His father died when he was twenty-two. So at a tender age he had lost all his closest relatives. At the age of eighteen, he began his studies at the Faculty of Philosophy at the Jagiellonian University. He was able to complete only one year. The Second World War broke out on September 1, 1939, and the new academic year did not last longer than November 6, 1939, the day the Germans who had invaded Poland rounded up all the professors in the University and deported them to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The young

Karol wanted to avoid being deported to do forced labor in Germany so he began to work as a laborer in a stone quarry. He was present when dynamite was being detonated, and some rocks fell on a co-worker and killed him. In his book, *Gift and Mystery*, written on the fiftieth anniversary of his priestly ordination, he wrote: "The experience left a profound impression on me."¹ He put his impressions from that occasion into a poem in which he said:

They took his body, and walked in a silent line.
Toil still lingered about him, a sense of wrong.²

And how can one ever forget the attempt on his life at St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981?

As one who lived, labored, and walked in the valley of death, Pope John Paul II knew how to reflect on the reality of death. And in those reflections he left the world precious lessons. He taught the world from the parishes of the Church in Krakow, from the Episcopal chair of Krakow, from the chair of Peter in Rome, even on his deathbed. He proclaimed the Good News of hope in the resurrection in the final moments of his earthly life by asking that the narrative of the last three stations of the cross be read to him. By so doing, he taught us that life is a way of the cross, that death is the culmination of the way of the cross, and that the last station is in fact beyond the tomb. It is the resurrection.

In 1976, when Pope Paul VI invited Karol Cardinal Wojtyla to preach at the retreat of the Papal Household, Paul VI was himself at the twilight of his life. He would die two years later.³ Perhaps because Paul VI was close to death, for he would taste his own death two years later, Karol the retreat preacher offered, among other reflections, a reflection on death. In it he said:

Every dying man has in him the biological reality of death, the "dissolution of the body," and also the human experience of dying, in which "the seed of eternity . . . rebels against death," and this seed "is inherent in every man, who cannot be reduced to mere matter"; finally every man has inherent in him the mystery of a new life which Christ has brought and which he has grafted on to humanity. . . .

Even though a man does not choose his own death, nonetheless by choosing his own way of life he does, in a way, choose his own death

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery*. (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 9.

² Pope John Paul, II, "The Quarry, IV, In memory of a fellow worker," 3–3, quoted in *Gift and Mystery*, 9.

³ Those retreat conferences are found in the book *Sign of Contradiction* by Karol Wojtyla, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979).

too. Thus his death becomes the perfect ratification of his life and of the choice he made.⁴

What the future pope said in that reflection came from the personalistic philosophy of the time. But that stance of personalistic philosophy—that we choose our death by the kind of life we choose to live—was anticipated by the writer of the second letter to Timothy when he wrote the words we used as the first reading of this Mass (2 Timothy 2:8–13). I had said some moments ago that when we shall die and how we die are uncertain. Yes. We may be lacking in mathematical certitude concerning the date and manner of death. But the way we choose to live our lives is indicative of the kind of death we have chosen. For this reason, it is very much true that, like Timothy, we too can rely on this saying: If we have died with him, then we shall live with him.

The one who chooses to live a life dedicated to the service of Christ and humanity chooses to die with Christ, and the one who chooses to die with Christ chooses to enter into glory with Christ. The one who chooses to live in union with Christ chooses a death that is a Passover from life to Life, from an earthly life lived in friendship with Christ to eternal life. So the saying is true: If we endure [with the Lord] then we shall reign with him.

Karol Wojtyła chose to labor through his life for the service of humanity, and for the service of the Gospel of Christ. When he chose to become a priest, he had his priestly formation in secret, in very difficult conditions. Concerning this, he wrote:

During the time of the [German] occupation the Metropolitan Archbishop set up the seminary, clandestinely, at his residence. This could have led at any moment to severe repression directed against the superiors and the seminarians by the German authorities.⁵

What strikes me most about his priestly formation was the fact that he had to work as a laborer even while studying for the priesthood. And he suffered a lot for that reason. George Hunston Williams captured this vividly in his book, *The Mind of John Paul II*, as he wrote about the most difficult book the young seminarian Karol read:

Wojtyła . . . remembers that the most difficult book for the future Pope, and perhaps the one that started him out on a career in philosophy, was one given him to study by Father Klosaka. It was entitled *Ontology or*

⁴ Ibid., 160–61.

⁵ *Gift and Mystery*, 12–13.

Metaphysics and was written by Rev. Prof. Kazimierz Wais (1865–1934) of Lwow. . . . Workers saw Wojtyla puzzling over it while he awaited the periodic purification of water used in the boiler room he tended in Solvay. Fellow seminarian Mieczyslaw Malinski remembers Wojtyla, in his blue-grey overalls and clogs without socks, carrying the book on his way to the Solvay chemical factory and responding to an enquiry about the *Metaphysics* of Wais thus: “Yes, it’s hard going. I sit by the boiler and try to understand it—I feel it ought to be very important to me.” That was in September 1942. . . . Years later, in his pontifical garb, he would say to his priestly friend of so many years something more: “For a long time I couldn’t cope with the book and I actually wept over it. It was not until two months later, in December and January (1942–43), that I began to make something of it, but in the end it opened up a whole new world to me. It showed me a new approach to reality, and made me aware of questions I had only dimly perceived. . . .”⁶

Reading the chapter of his life on his priestly formation drives home a profound lesson that no priest or candidate for the priesthood must overlook. The story of his formation for the priesthood shows with extraordinary clarity that priestly formation is no bloodless myth. You become a great priest when you freely submit to the pedagogy of suffering. All that he learned from the school of suffering prepared him for the wonderful work he did as a parish priest, as a university professor, as Archbishop of Krakow, and as Bishop of Rome. As a seminarian, as a candidate for the priesthood, he learned to be led, and by so doing, he learned to lead. And he led us well. He led us very well.

Just as he loomed large in his earthly life, the person and work of Karol Jozef Wojtyla, all the noble values and ideals that John Paul II stood for, will remain conspicuous in the vast palaces of human memory. They will remain indelible in the minds of innumerable members of the human family. For us in Nigeria, we must not fail to remember the wise words he spoke to us in 1982 and in 1998. When he visited Nigeria for the first time in 1982, he referred to our country as “a credit to Africa.” When he came a second time, we were in the grips of a mindlessly brutal military dictatorship. He did not fail to plead with the dictator “to let my people go.” But for his intervention, current President Olusegun Obasanjo would have been executed. By the time of his second visit to Nigeria, things were so bad that the country that John Paul II had referred to as a credit to Africa in 1982 was described in 1998 as “a disgrace to Africa”

⁶ George Hunston Williams, *The Mind of John Paul II* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), pp. 86–88, quoted in Richard M. Liddy, *Transforming Light: Intellectual Conversion in the Early Loneran* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press/Glazner Books, 1993).

by the elder African statesman, Nelson Mandela. Now that it can be said that we are taking tentative steps in the direction of respect for the rule of law and holistic development, we would do well to re-read the pope's speeches in Nigeria in 1982 and 1998.

As we come face to face with the mystery of death, of our death, and of the death of Pope John Paul II, Christ our rising Sun uses his words in the Gospel of this Mass to provide us with light, with meaning, with strength and consolation: "Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest." He addressed those words to his disciples who had just returned from their preaching mission. And just as those disciples went back to Christ to give him a report of their preaching mission, John Paul II has gone back to the Lord to give an account of his stewardship as Chief Shepherd of the people of God.

May Christ our Lord say the same words to him: Come to me, you who labored so much for the Gospel; come, you who lived and worked in the shadow of death; come, and I will give you rest. *Amen.* **N&V**

