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“Be faithful, be an apostle,” John Paul II told me

Alejandra Vanney is a lawyer who in the 90s moved from Argentina to Poland to help begin the apostolic work of Opus Dei there. Her work at the University of Warsaw gave her the opportunity to travel to Rome to take part in several encounters with Pope John Paul II.

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I give thanks to God for giving me the opportunity to get to know personally a saint who, although the whole world now acclaims him as “Saint John Paul the Great,” was for me an example of a very down to earth sanctity. He was always very affectionate and concerned about each person, one by one.

“Aleksandra!”, he would call out when he spotted me among a group of Polish students. But I have to admit that it was sometimes Bishop Stanislaw Diswicz, his personal secretary, who whispered to him: “She’s from Argentina, from Poland, from Opus Dei....”

He truly loved people and had a universal heart that led him to love each charism in the Church. I once saw how he went up to a group of Carmelite nuns and joked with them: “So you’ve escaped from your cloister?” I also saw how he became

an Italian when with Italians. After being introduced to an Italian family he remarked with surprise: “But how is that that Grandma and Grandpa are standing.” And he insisted that chairs be brought for them.

He paid close attention to each person. In an audience when I was present someone there showed him a book. Since it was quite heavy, John Paul II suggested that it be placed on a table. His secretaries moved several chairs to make room. The man with the book didn't realize it, and when he tried to sit down he ended up on the ground. People there began to laugh. The Pope looked intently at them, expressing surprise at their lack of charity.

In these audiences with small groups of Polish people, many different institutions were represented: scouts, choirs, bishops with seminarians. He had a great capacity to converse with

each one there and listen to their comments. He would ask the bishops about their seminarians, and how they were doing.

When I was with him I realized how quickly he grasped what I was concerned about. Once I told him I was worried about a person who was quite distant from God. Turning serious, he said: "Have you asked Saint Josemaria for that person." "Yes, I'm asking him to help her," I told him. "Well, trust in his help," he insisted. Afterwards, with his great ability to go from transcendent topics to very human ones, he gave me an encouraging smile and said: "Don't worry, the Pope is going to pray too."

When he met my parents he was very affectionate. Almost his first words were: "I want to thank you." He was referring to the fact that they had a daughter dedicated to God and

that they were happy to have her living far from them.

I especially remember the time I saw him when I was with a group of young women from Poland on the occasion of the Jubilee for the Year 2000. He encouraged us with great strength to be generous with God. “Jesus is going to pass very close to you during these days,” he told us. “If he calls you to give him everything don’t tell him no. I ask you this as the Vicar of Christ; it’s the strongest argument I have.”

The last time I saw him, a few days before his death, was in the Library of the Pontifical Apartment. I had an opportunity to tell him a few things and he looked at me without saying anything. He was very sick. I had just taken part in the UNIV Congress, the gathering in Rome over Easter of university students that began under Saint Josemaria’s encouragement in

1968. Owing to his illness we hadn't been able to have the traditional audience with the Pope, and I told him that he had been even more present to us this year than in the past because we had prayed a lot for him. His personal secretary answered in his name: "The Pope is very happy because he knows he can count on the UNIV students even though he can't see them."

Finally, just as I was about to leave, John Paul II told me: "Be faithful, be an apostle."