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The Pope: Witness to Love

“The life and words of the Pope display a deep consistency that can be summarized in one phrase: John Paul II is a credible witness to Love.” An article by Bishop Javier Echevarría published in the Barcelona newspaper “La Vanguardia” on the occasion of the Pope’s fifth trip to Spain.

05/08/2003

We should thank John, Jesus’ young disciple, for recording in his Gospel

the incisive dialogue between the resurrected Christ and Peter, at the edge of Lake Tiberias after the miraculous catch of fish. Our Lord lights a fire and prepares some fish and bread for the seven disciples who have just spent the night in their boat hard at work fishing. After breakfast, he takes Peter aside and asks him three times if he loves him more than the others. Simon answers the first two times by saying simply that he loves our Lord. On the third occasion, his grief leads him to add: “Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you.” Jesus responds to this profession of love by entrusting Peter with the mission of caring for his flock.

Since that moment and right to the end of history, the mission of Peter’s successors is tied to the great paradox of human existence: we know we are bearers of the highest aspirations while at the same time

we experience our personal smallness and weakness. The Son of God asked Peter three times for a profession of love, because it is only through their love for the Master that the successors of the fisherman from Galilee will be able to serve and strengthen their brothers.

John Paul II's fifth trip to Spain leads me to recall these pages of John's Gospel. In our time, when great technological progress contrasts with deep doubts about the mystery of the human person, John Paul II ceaselessly illumines the deepest dimension of our existence: the vocation to Love. I write this word with a capital letter not only because it refers mainly to Love for God, but also to highlight the greatness of Love in all its noble manifestations.

Credible witness

Some people express difficulty in understanding the consistency

between various aspects of the message of John Paul II. In some cases, they perceive a divergence between these two themes: his crystal clear teachings on birth control, abortion, euthanasia and respect for life; and on the other hand, his strong calls for justice and social solidarity. Nevertheless, the Pope's life and words display a deep consistency that can be summarized in one phrase: John Paul II is a credible witness to Love.

God has granted us a successor to Peter who, through both his priestly experience and his vocation as a writer and philosopher, has helped us understand better the greatness of the divine call to Love. In a climate of distrust and fear, he has invited us to cross the threshold of hope and to seek--with God's help--a love that is generous, clean and freely-bestowed. He has highlighted the greatness of the marital union, a gift granted by

God for Love and the transmission of life. He has illumined--without fears born of a false spiritualism--the spousal nature of the human body. And, based on his own experience of spiritual paternity, he has shown both the beauty of marriage and the marvelous fruitfulness of celibacy freely received as God's gift.

At the World Youth Day of the Great Jubilee in the Year 2000, we witnessed the positive response of countless youths to a Pope, already elderly, who affirmed human existence as being-for-Life, instead of a nihilistic being-for-death, speaking to them with persuasive conviction of the generous love that leads to self-sacrifice.

I think that this explains why the Pope has shown so much concern for families and why he considers them the foundation of all true human progress. Nor is there is a change of

tone when John Paul II turns to another fundamental dimension of our existence: work. Here also he places priority on the growth of the person through professional activity in the service of others. Focusing on mere economic aspects serves to diminish the individual, to reduce him to a cog in the productive machine. Often it is necessary to risk changing certain structures that seem practical or pragmatic but that limit the free development of persons. The Catalanian poet Joan Maragall put it very well: “Esfuérzate en tu quehacer / como si de cada detalle que pienses, / de cada palabra que digas, / de cada pieza que pongas, / de cada golpe de martillo que des, / dependiese la salvación de la humanidad / porque en efecto depende, créelo” (Strive in your task / as though on each small detail that you consider / on each word that you say, / on each piece that you place, / on each hammer blow that you

strike, / depends the salvation of humanity / because it truly does, believe me.)

The same vocation to Love resounds when John Paul II seeks to greet each person that approaches him, when he smiles on taking a small child in his arms and blessing it, when he plays with his cane or sings during his meetings with young people, trying to speak with each one, even when there are many thousands present. Therefore, his tone becomes especially urgent when defending human rights, when giving voice to the weakest, as in the case of many African countries that feel themselves abandoned. His insistence on speaking of man not in general or collective terms, but rather in terms of his unrepeatable uniqueness, has helped us realize more fully that each person has an incommensurable dignity and value.

Defending Love

Likewise, his constancy in recalling our moral duty to exhaust all possible means of peacefully resolving conflicts reflects a love without any discrimination. Thus he never fails to recall for us deeply important matters: the moral and physical sufferings of the civilian population, the resentments that embitter hearts, the barriers that impede fraternity. If on occasion military conflict cannot be avoided, which is always a “defeat for humanity” (Speech to Diplomatic Corps, January 13, 2003), this does not mean that the Pope’s words have been useless. It means rather that perhaps we have not sufficiently sought peace, in all its manifestations: peace in consciences, in families, in the workplace, in public life.

I would like to emphasize, finally, that John Paul II defends Love against its most powerful enemy: the ego of each person when he allows himself to be carried away by his own weakness and selfishness. The Holy Father has inspired deep decisions in many young people, helping them to discover their Christian vocation, because his testimony is backed up by his life, by his daily physical spending of himself.

For the past 25 years, he has been a credible witness to God's Love for each human being, traveling all over the world. And even more so now, when his bodily weakness allows us to glimpse better the strength of divine Love in his life. Many people have been moved, especially recently, by his unconditional self-giving, which is simply the intensification of what he has been doing throughout his entire

pontificate. He has spared no effort, spurned no sacrifice.

The first Christian community in Jerusalem put the sick in the path of Peter, so that at least his shadow would touch them and cure them. I ask God that the shadow of the steps of John Paul II may cure us of our ills, and that we may learn from the life of this credible witness to God's Love.

La Vanguardia (Barcelona)

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(03/14/2026)