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In the house of the Father

John Paul II has spoken to us in many ways: through encyclicals, homilies and addresses; with letters and books; by word of mouth, in writing and with images.

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He has also used the language of symbols, with eloquent gestures, loaded with meaning. All those actions came forth from the depths of a soul intimately united to Jesus

Christ. This is why they came loaded with the strength of the Word of God.

These thoughts came to my mind with repetitive force on the night of Saturday, the 2nd of April. It seemed to me that the whole day was a sequence of signs of penetrating eloquence. In the morning, we got to know the brief words he addressed to the youth, his last message: "I have sought you; now you have come to me, and I thank you!" As was commented in some television news in Italy, the 2nd of April had been an improvised and unforeseen "World Youth Day". Already that night, 100,000 people were praying to the Virgin for the Pope, while he was dying. The Virgin compassionately accepted the prayer of children for their father. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death." It seems that John Paul II died at the end of the prayers in the Square, and that the

"Amen" was his farewell word. Earlier, at eight o'clock, Msgr. Stanislaus Dziwisz celebrated the Mass of the Sunday of Divine Mercy. Is there any word more consoling that we could pronounce at the deathbed of a loved one? The Mercy of God the Father, which has always accompanied you, awaits you in Heaven, the definitive dwelling place of Love.

That day, Saturday the 2nd of April, appeared to my eyes, dense with symbolism, with coincidences impossible to foresee, impossible to organise. Only the Providence of God, rich in mercy, can bring together the praying of thousands of children for their father, before the Virgin Mary, on the eve of the universal feast of His Divine Mercy.

All these circumstances speak to us, not only with the language of words, nor with the expressiveness of

emotions, but also with the beauty of symbols which leave an indelible print in the soul.

The liturgy that will be celebrated this Friday 8th of April in the funeral ceremonies of John Paul II bring to our lips a beautiful prayer of the preface of the Mass for the Dead, which confirms us in "the hope of our happy resurrection". With what certainty the Church sings, "The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality!" How natural it is for us to imagine the Pope in the presence of the Most Holy Trinity, now alive forever, because "Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven."

John Paul II has been outstanding by his many qualities and gifts of

character, and at this time there is no shortage of people extolling his role in history of the Church and of humanity, his human and supernatural virtues, his talents. For me -as for innumerable men and women in the whole world-, the Pope has been, before anything else, a father. In his person we have experienced, in a very intense way, the fact that the Church is united by bonds of communion proper to a family; that the Pope is a father for Catholics of the most diverse countries, that he is the principle and foundation of unity in the Church, a source of fraternity among all men, a promoter of peace.

I dare say that John Paul II has played the role of father in a most exalted way and above everything else. Father and vicar of Christ, with his rich personality: a living symbol among us. If only we could heed and obey everything God asks of us as he

did, we would succeed in making the Church, "the home and school of communion" as John Paul desired!

Motives for thanksgiving abound today: to God for the gift of this Pope; to John Paul II for his strong and gentle fidelity; to so many people - eminent or unknown- who have been his collaborators in these almost twenty-seven years; especially to those who have taken care of him with filial love until the last moment: to Msgr. Dziwisz -Don Stanislaus- , a faithful assistant for a lifetime; to those religious women whose names do not appear in the newspapers; to Poland, who has given this illustrious son to the Church; to the doctors; to the journalists who are telling us, with an emotion they share, of these distressful and unique moments... there is no space here for a list, but it is of justice to express, at least in a generic way, the gratitude of the Church's children towards those

persons who have always been close by and have served faithfully this good and loyal servant whom the Lord has received with an embrace into heaven.

John Paul II repeated often, also when people asked him not to tax himself so much physically, "after one Pope another comes". I think that expression shows, both his consciousness to be passing through in this world, like everyone else, and also his certainty of not having been placed by the Holy Spirit in the see of Peter to be acclaimed as man, but rather, that men, through him, would acclaim God.

During these days, we Catholics are praying already for the next Pope, whoever he may be. We already love him with all our soul, even before knowing him. And we pray to our most beloved John Paul II that he intercede before God for his

successor. Some words of St. Josemaria Escriva come to my mind: "I carry with me every day in my heart, in my mind and on my lips an aspiration: Rome!" The name of a city. A prayer. A bond of union for all Catholics and for all men of good will.

Javier Echevarría, Prelate of Opus Dei, The Guardian, Lagos, Nigeria

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