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The Christian transparency in John Paul II

Article by the Prelate of Opus Dei published in the "234NEXT Newspaper" (Lagos, Nigeria).

"Persons of all races and conditions have seen shine in him the face of the Risen One."

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For many years we have heard the testimonies of young people and people who are not so young, who have felt attracted to Christ thanks to

the words, the example and closeness of John Paul II. With God's help, some have embarked upon a path of the search for holiness without changing their state of life, in married life or in celibacy; others, in the priesthood or religious life. There are thousands of them, and sometimes they are referred to as "the generation of John Paul II".

What was the secret of the evangelizing efficacy of this extraordinary Pontiff? It is evident that Karol Wojtyla was an untiring defender of human dignity, a solicitous shepherd, a credible communicator of the truth and a father, as much for believers as for unbelievers; but the Pope who has led us from the second into the third millennium has been, above all, a man in love with Jesus Christ and identified with Him.

“To know who John Paul II is one has to see him pray, especially in the intimacy of his private chapel”, wrote one of the biographers of this holy Pontiff. And effectively, it is just like that. One of the last photographs of his earthly sojourn, was taken in his private chapel as he followed, through the television screen, the praying of the Stations of the Cross which took place in the Coliseum. That Holy Friday of 2005, John Paul II could not preside over the ceremony with his physical presence, as he had done in previous years: he was no longer able to speak or walk. But in that image one can appreciate the intensity of the moment he was living. Holding on to a large wooden crucifix, the Pope embraces Jesus on the cross, he places his heart close to the Crucified and kisses Him. The image of John Paul II, old and sick, united to the Cross, is a speech just as eloquent as that of his vigorous words or his exhausting journeys.

The new blessed has carried out with heroic generosity the command of Christ to His disciples: “Go out to the whole world and preach the Gospel to all men” (Mk 16, 15). With his zeal to reach even the remotest corners of Africa, of America, of Asia, of Europe and Oceania, John Paul II did not think of himself: he was moved by the desire to spend his life in the service of others, his eagerness to make known the dignity of the human being – made in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by Christ – and to transmit the message of the Gospel.

On one occasion, late in the evening, I accompanied Bishop Alvaro del Portillo – then Prelate of Opus Dei – to the pontifical apartment. While we awaited the arrival of the Pope, we heard tired steps, as if someone were dragging his feet, as he drew near along the corridor: it was John Paul II, very fatigued. Bishop del Portillo

exclaimed: “Holy Father, how tired you are!”. The Pope looked at him and, in a kind voice, explained: “If I were not tired at this time of the day, it would be a sign that I had not fulfilled my duty”.

His zeal for souls moved him to travel as far as the last corner of the earth to spread the message of Christ. Is there anyone on earth who has shaken hands with so many people in his life or has crossed glances with so many persons? This effort, which was also human, was another way of embracing and uniting himself with the Crucified One.

The universality of the heart of John Paul II not only led him to an activity which we could call exterior: but also in his interior this spirit was like a heartbeat, by which he made his own the concerns of the whole world. Daily, from his private chapel in the

Vatican, he went round the whole world. This is why his response to a journalist who wanted to know how the Pope prayed was natural: the prayer of the Pope – he responded – is a “pilgrimage throughout the whole world praying with the mind and with the heart”. In his prayer – he explained – emerges “the geography of the communities, of the Churches, of the societies and also of the problems which distress the contemporary world”; and, in this way, the Pope “presents to God the joys and the hopes and, at the same time, the sorrows and worries the Church shares with contemporary humanity”.

That universal heart and that missionary impulse lead him to dialogue with persons of every category. This was made particularly patent during the jubilee year 2000: he wanted to meet with children, the youth, adults, and old people; with

sportsmen and women, artists, governors, politicians, the police and the military; farm workers, university students, the prisoners and the sick; with families, people in the world of entertainment, emigrants and travellers...

The very biography of Karol Wojtyla can be “read” as a continuous taking of the Gospel to the most varied sector of the human society: to families, to the school and the factory, to the theatre and the world of literature, to the cities of skyscrapers and to the neighbourhoods of huts. His own history made him see with clarity that it is possible to make Christ present in all circumstances, also in the tragic moments of the world war and the totalitarian dominion that ruled in his native land. In the most diverse scenes of the modern period, John Paul II was a bearer of the light of Christ to the entire humanity. With

his existence he taught us to discover God in the different circumstances which are our lot to live in.

In one of his writings, St Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, contemplates Jesus on the Cross as the Eternal High Priest, who “has his arms open to the whole of humanity”. I think that the earthly life of John Paul II has been an exemplary copy of this Lord who welcomes all men and women in his heart, pouring out his love and mercy on each one, with a special attention to the sick and the disabled.

The life of a Christian is nothing else but to try to configure oneself to Christ; and John Paul II has fulfilled this in an excellent way: with his heroic response to grace, with his joy of being a son of God, persons of all races and conditions have seen shine in him the face of the Risen One.

The photograph to which I referred at the beginning of these reflections

seems to me to be a graphic synthesis of the life of John Paul II: a Pontiff fatigued by the prolonged time of service to souls, who directs the gaze of the world towards Jesus on the Cross, in order to make it easier for each one to find there the answers to his deepest questions. The life of the new blessed is, certainly, an example of Christian transparency: to make visible, through one's own life, the face and merciful sentiments of Jesus. I think that is the reason and the secret of his evangelizing efficacy. I am convinced - and that is what I ask God for – that his elevation to the altars will promote in the world and in the Church a wave of faith and love, of desires of service to others, of thanksgiving to Our Lord.

The 1st of May 2011, in St. Peter's Square, under the affectionate gaze of the Mother of the Church, we will be able to unite ourselves to Benedict

XVI and to say once more: “We want to express our profound gratitude to the Lord for the gift of John Paul II and we want also to give thanks to this Pope for all he did and suffered” (General audience, 18th of May 2005). Those of us who knew him during his life, now have the joyful duty of making him known to future generations.

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