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Thank you, Holy Father

Bishop Javier Echevarría, the prelate of Opus Dei, commemorates the 25th anniversary of John Paul II's pontificate in this article published in ABC (Madrid) and other papers.

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Photos of the Pope from the last few years show one thing that's changed, and another that hasn't. As time passes, we see a man's body slowly but surely breaking down. But what

comes home just as clearly and even more forcefully is the image of the same crowds with the same fervor, pressing about him every place he goes.

Many have tried to explain the mystery of John Paul II's magnetism. In general they have sought for an answer in the hopes that move so many people to turn to him. For example, with all the conflicts bloodying the world, there is a widespread desire for peace, and John Paul II has continually declared that the path to true peace lies in practicing a forgiveness that outlasts division. Others say that what moves us to look to the Pope is the keen thirst for truth felt by a society tired of lies and fleeting trends: the voice of the Pope fearlessly proclaims a perennial truth, an incorruptible morality, which rises up in defense of the dignity of man.

But we must go deeper if we wish to truly understand John Paul II's extraordinary attraction. We must look at what theology calls the *sensus fidei*: a sort of instinct of faith permeating the minds and hearts of Catholics.

From this perspective, we see a Church clustered around the Pope, a Church unable to distance itself from its supreme Shepherd, a Church that grasps the impossibility of conceiving of itself without him. And we see a Pope who lives for the Church, a Pope in whom the Church seeks the face of Christ.

Anyone who listens to him can sense that he speaks with an authority from above—from that Gospel which will not disappear “till heaven and earth pass away” (Mt 5:18). Close to the successor of Peter we feel a bond of communion stronger than any tie based on history or culture. We

touch the mystery that makes the Church the family of God and makes each person a daughter or son of God.

Age and physical suffering are weakening his strength but strengthening his will, as he becomes ever more united to the cross of Jesus, the one whom he loves with such obvious and exemplary generosity.

The Pope has called us *to contemplate the face of Christ*, so that the Church can “take up with new impetus its evangelizing mission” in this new millennium (Apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 2). And we cannot help but think of the Pope’s own example in his mission as Shepherd of the universal Church, when we read these other words of his: “The men and women of our own day — often perhaps unconsciously — ask believers not

only to ‘speak’ of Christ, but in a certain sense to ‘show’ him to them. And is it not the Church's task to reflect the light of Christ in every historical period, to make his face shine also before the generations of the new millennium?” (*Ibid.* 16).

This “contact” with our Lord is produced especially through pain: “The Church is constantly invited by Christ to touch his wounds, to recognize, that is, the fullness of his humanity taken from Mary, given up to death, transfigured by the Resurrection: ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side’ (Jn 20:27). Like Thomas, the Church bows down in adoration before the Risen One, clothed in the fullness of his divine splendor, and never ceases to exclaim: ‘My Lord and my God!’ (Jn 20:28)” (*Ibid.* 21).

In the union between Peter's successor and Jesus Christ, which everyone senses to one degree or another, we find another explanation of the mysterious harmony between Pope and people. The natural sentiment of affection and gratitude which Catholics have for John Paul II is, fundamentally, a recognition that the Pope has made us rediscover the best in ourselves: our personal relationship with God, who created us and saved us in his love.

In his first encyclical, the Pope wrote that man "is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission." The final reason for the connection he makes with the hearts of believers is the fact that his passion for man has its roots in the *God-become-man*. We feel close to John Paul II because he reminds us that Christ is close to us, that he lives with us, that he gives meaning to our lives. Certainty of Christ's closeness

needs no more evidence than that of the cross, the cross to which the Pope is also fastened.

It is only logical then for us to commemorate John Paul II's 25th anniversary by considering his importance, the profundity of his teachings, and the consequences of his decisions. And it is also quite natural for us to feel the need to express our gratitude with our whole heart. As he recently requested in Pompeii on the feast of our Lady of the Rosary, let us pray for him always, as a sign of our filial affection and of our deep and sincere gratitude.