

Bishop Javier Echevarría, the Prelate of Opus Dei, recalls his personal memories of the pope who led the Church into the new millennium

A man who embraced the human race

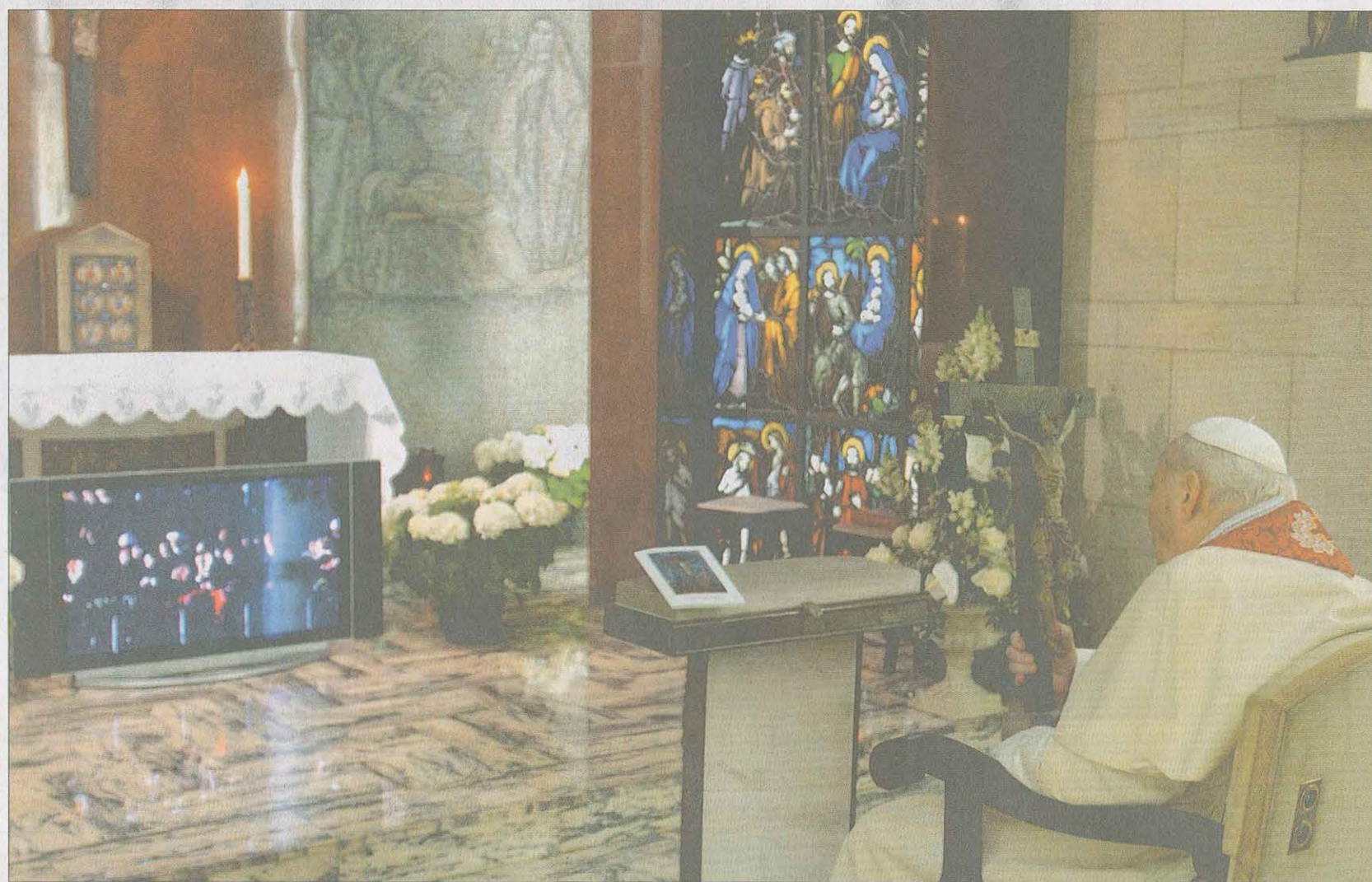
For years now young people and not-so-young people have been testifying to the way John Paul II's words, example and warmth brought them to Christ. God used him to help some of them to pursue holiness in marriage or celibacy in the world, and others in the priesthood or religious life. What sometimes gets called the "John Paul II generation" numbers many thousands.

What was the secret of this extraordinary Pope's effective evangelising? Karol Wojtyła was obviously a tireless defender of human dignity, a caring pastor, a credible communicator of the truth and a father to believers and non-believers alike. But the Pope who guided us from the second millennium into the third was above all someone who was in love with Jesus Christ to the point of total identification with him.

One of his biographers wrote: "If you want to know who John Paul II is, you need to see him praying, especially in his chapel, in private." This is exactly the case. One of the last photographs taken of him shows him in his private chapel, following the Stations of the Cross televised from the Colosseum. On that Good Friday in 2005 John Paul II could not take part in person as he had done in previous years – he could no longer walk or even speak. But the photograph shows how intensely he was experiencing it. Holding a large wooden crucifix tightly in his hands, the Pope embraces Jesus on the Cross, holds the figure of Jesus to his heart, and kisses it. That image of John Paul II, old and ill, united to the Cross, speaks just as eloquently as his rousing words and his exhausting travels.

The soon-to-be-beatified Pope was heroic in carrying out Christ's command to his disciples: "Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News to every creature" (Mk 16:15). In his zeal to reach the furthest corners of Africa, America, Asia, Australasia and Europe John Paul II was not thinking of himself. What drove him was his desire to spend himself in the service of other people, his eagerness to demonstrate the dignity of every human being, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by Christ, and to pass on the Gospel message.

On one occasion, in the evening, Mgr Alvaro del Portillo, the then prelate of Opus Dei, and I went to the pope's apartment. We waited for the pope to arrive, and heard some tired, dragging footsteps



Pope John Paul II on Good Friday 2005: 'The image of John Paul II, old and ill, united to the Cross, speaks just as eloquently as his rousing words and his exhausting travels'

AP Photo

approaching along the corridor. It was John Paul II, looking exhausted. Mgr del Portillo exclaimed: "Holy Father, how tired you are!" The Pope looked at him and explained gently: "If I weren't tired at this time of day, it would mean I hadn't done my duty."

His zeal for souls led him to take the message of Christ to the furthest corners of the world. Is there anyone on earth who has shaken as many people's hands as he did in their lives or looked as many people in the eyes? The effort it cost him, humanly and spiritually, was another way for him to embrace and unite himself with Christ on the Cross.

The universal reach of John Paul II's heart not only led him to what could be termed "external" action; his spirit was

"internally" active as well, so that he made everyone's needs his own. Every day, from his private chapel in the Vatican, he travelled as a pilgrim through the whole world. So when a journalist once asked him how he prayed, he answered quite naturally that "every day the pontiff must open his prayer, his thought, his heart to the entire world". In his prayer, he explained, there emerged "a geography of communities, churches, societies, and also of the problems that trouble the world today". And like that, the pope "set[s] forth before God all the joys and hopes as well as the griefs and anxieties that the Church shares with humanity today".

The universal outreach of his heart, and the sense of mission that drove him, led him to

dialogue with all kinds of people. This became evident in the Jubilee Year 2000 – he met children, young people, adults and the elderly, sportspeople, artists, rulers, politicians, policemen and soldiers, agricultural labourers, university lecturers and students, prisoners and sick people, families, people from the world of entertainment, emigrants and travellers.

Karol Wojtyła's whole life-story can be read as a continual process of taking the Gospel to the most varied sectors of human society: to families, the school, the factory, the theatre, literature, cities of skyscrapers and shanty towns. His own story taught him clearly that it is possible to make Christ present in all circumstances, including the tragic times of the world

war, and totalitarian rule in his home country. In the most diverse scenes of modern life, John Paul II brought Jesus Christ's light to all mankind. His life teaches us how to discover God in the circumstances we live in.

In one of his works St Josemaría Escrivá contemplates Jesus on the Cross as the Eternal Priest who "opens his arms to the whole human race". I think John Paul II's journey on earth was an exemplary copy of this Lord who welcomes all men and women into his heart, pouring out love and mercy on every single one, especially the sick and disabled.

In its essence, Christian life means trying to be configured with Christ. John Paul II accomplished this in a truly outstanding way. Through his heroic

response to grace, through the joy he felt at being a child of God, people of every race and from every walk of life saw the face of the Risen Christ shining in him.

It seems to me that the photo I referred to earlier offers a graphic synthesis of John Paul II's life – a pope tired out by the length of his time of service to souls, who directs the world's gaze to Jesus on the Cross, to enable each and every person to find there the answers to their deepest questions. The life of the soon-to-be-beatified pope is, then, an example of a life that is transparently Christian, letting Jesus's face and merciful attitude show through his own life. I think that that is the reason and secret of his effectiveness in evangelising.

And I am convinced that – as I pray will happen – his beatification will unleash in the world and the Church a tidal wave of faith and love, the desire to serve others, and gratitude to God our Lord.

On May 1, in St Peter's Square, under the loving eyes of Our Lady, Mother of the Church, we will be able to say again, in union with Benedict XVI: "We want to tell the Lord a heartfelt 'thank you' for the gift of this pope and to say 'thank you' to the pope himself for all that he did and suffered" (General audience, May 18 2005). We who knew him in this life now have the joyful responsibility of making him known to future generations.

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