

Blessed Pope John Paul II and his
Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary

Shrouded all his life in divine Providence and protection through all kinds of suffering, including at least fifteen assassination attempts, and having lost all his family by the age of twenty one, this holy man abandoned himself repeatedly in all things using two words: *Totus Tuus* (All Yours). To Whom were these words addressed but to the Sacred Heart of Jesus through the hands of our Blessed Mother.

Ever faithful to his motto, Blessed John Paul always began and ended all things-including his life- with the Blessed Virgin. In his spiritual testaments of 1979 and 1980, he wrote:” In life and death I am *Totus Tuus* through Mary Immaculate. In her motherly hands I leave everything and Everyone with whom my life and my vocation have brought me into contact. In these Hand I above all leave the Church, and also my Nation and all mankind” (www.vatican.va, John Paul ii).

We cannot or should not think of the Immaculate Heart without also thinking of Mary's Sorrowful Heart. Mary was immaculate from her conception and it was the sorrows she willingly accepted that expanded her Motherly Heart. John Paul, by imitating Mary in embracing his sufferings, became ever more united to her Immaculate Heart. This devotion is what we hope to peer into through this talk tonight.

John Paul was the youngest child of three born to Karol and Emilia Wojtylas. His brother, Edmund was 14 years his senior. Next came his sister who, dying in infancy, he would never know. We could call his mother a prophet for it is said she "walked through their hometown of Wadowice, telling neighbors, 'You'll see, my Lolek will be great man someday' "(Weigel, 28). Sadly, she would not live to see it, dying of kidney failure and congenital heart disease five weeks before his ninth birthday (Weigel, 29). She did not, however, leave this earth without first teaching him the Sign of the Cross, forming him in daily prayer and working to help provide for his needs. While the Holy Father did not

recall many memories of his mother, one of the first poems he wrote was of her. He titled it *The White Grave*. It reads:

Over your white grave
White flowers of life bloom –
Oh, how many years have gone by
Without you – how many years?...

Over your white grave
O Mother, my extinct beloved,

For a son's full love,

A prayer:

Eternal Rest –

(Szulc, 66).

In his book, *Gift and Mystery*, the Holy Father, reflecting on his vocation, recalled memories of his childhood. “On a hilltop in Wadowice, there was a Carmelite monastery; people would go there in great numbers and this was reflected in the widespread use of the scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. I too received the scapular, I

think at the age of ten and I still wear it. Both in the parish church and at the Carmelite monastery, my devotion to Mary took shape from the years of my early childhood and adolescence up through secondary school” (Gift and Mystery, 27- 28). At the age of fifteen, he was “accepted as a member of the high school Marian sodality. Half a year later, he was elected as president, serving in this position for two years” (Szulc, 77).

When one remembers our Beloved John Paul, he cannot help recalling his nationality. This Slavic pope was a faithful son of his motherland. Throughout his life he was to watch her people suffer through war and oppression. We cannot forget he personally shared in her suffering as he watched universities close, his Jewish friends being arrested during the Nazi occupation, having to work in the quarry during the war and many other details that must go unlisted.

As Americans, we treasure our freedom and all the good things for which our land stands; the Polish treasure is the “Black Madonna” – the

Queen and the Crown of Poland! To John Paul “she is the most venerated virgin in the world as the defender of Poland and a symbol of Catholic faith – the two together summing up the best Polish patriotic and religious sentiments” (Szulc, 46). Venerated as Queen, this heart of Poland is also known as our Lady of Czestochowa. Her image is believed to have been painted by St. Luke on a wooden plank from the table of the Holy Family. This revered image, darkened over the centuries, is notably striking for the slash on Mary’s face, placed there by a Hussite soldier during an invasion in 1430” (Szulc, 45). From childhood through his papacy, John Paul made numerous pilgrimages to this shrine.

During first pilgrimage home as Roman Pontiff, “speaking to the million Poles gathered and his voice breaking with emotion said, ‘it was inconceivable that the first Polish Pope in history should not have come to this shrine of great hope; how could I not come here where many times I had whispered *totus tuus* in prayer before Mary’s image? How

could I not come to ‘listen to the beating heart of the Church and of the motherland in the heart of the Mother?’ “ (Weigel, 309).

His love and veneration for her was so great that he had an image of her placed in his private chapel and personal office. Placed in these two areas, we can say that Her Heart was there to receive his prayers and guide his work as he selflessly served and suffered for Holy Mother Church.

“As bishop – he chose his official motto “*Totus tuus*” taken from St. Louis Marie deMonfort, in whose Treatise he had found divine inspiration while reading it on the floor of the Solvay factory during the war. Henceforth, he placed the motto at the top of the page on every document and letter he wrote the rest of his life” (Szulc, 197).

More than writing his motto on everything, he lived and breathed it, especially when suffering came his way. For instance, in the first greeting to the public after his election, the Holy Father admitted, “I was

afraid to accept this choice, but I did so in a spirit of humility and obedience to our Lord and complete trust in His most Holy Mother, the Madonna” (Malinski,4).

When it came time to choose his Papal Coat of Arms, “Archbishop Heim, the Church’s acknowledged authority on the matter, prepared seven sketches of a coat-of-arms for John Paul. Disregarding the protocol of changing it from the one used while a bishop, he declined them all – determined to keep the arms he used as Archbishop of Krakow: it was designed with a large capital ‘M’ beneath a cross with the Montfort inspired motto, *Totus tuus* (Weigel, 265). Archbishop Heim was not happy, to say the least!

John Paul “believed that the Virgin Mary whom he deeply venerated...had saved his life on many occasions and taught him how to suffer” (Szulc, 30). It was at 5:13 pm, May 13, 1981 when Ali Agca fired two shots at the Pope. Later, the Holy Father recalled ‘at the very moment I fell, I had this vivid presentiment that I should be saved.’

Agca, a professional assassin, had fired at point-blank range. Yet the bullet that struck the Pope missed the main abdominal artery by the merest fraction of an inch. Had the artery been struck, he would have bled to death before being transferred from the Pope-mobile to the ambulance. The pope would later say, ‘One hand fired, and another guided the bullet’ “ (Weigel 412-414).

Four days after surgery, having tape-recorded a Sunday noon message for pilgrims in St. Peter’s Square, the Holy Father among other things, prayed, ‘United with Christ, Priest and Victim, I offer my sufferings for the Church and for the world. To you, Mary, I repeat: *Totus tuus ego sum*’ “ (Weigel, 414).

A year later, on the anniversary of the assassination attempt, the Pope traveled to Fatima, Portugal to thank our Lady for saving him and to “place the bullet that struck him on her altar. It was later fitted alongside diamonds in the golden crown worn by the statue of the Virgin, who is formally known as our Lady of the Rosary. The bullet-pierced and

bloodstained sash the pope had on when he was shot had been sent to the Black Madonna in Czestochowa” (Szulc, 366).

In 1991, he would return to Fatima renewing his thanksgiving and in May 2000 for a third and final time to beatify two of the three seers Jacinta and Francisco Marto. This same year the third secret of Fatima was revealed.

As I mentioned earlier, we cannot think of the Immaculate Heart without also pondering her sorrows. While praying the *Hail, Holy Queen*, we are reminded that life on earth is a valley of tears. Although we cannot now imitate the Glorious mysteries of the rosary, we are surely trained in the Joyful and Sorrowful ones! Pope John Paul experienced this in a spiritual and physical way. He called suffering “a grace and a necessary gift” (Weigel 721). While recovering from hip surgery he shared, “I meditated on all this (suffering) and thought it over again during my hospital stay...I understand that I have to lead Christ’s Church into the Third Millennium by prayer, by various programs, but I saw that this is

not enough: she must be led by suffering by the attack thirteen years ago and by this new sacrifice.” (Weigel, 721).

Within a time frame of 15 years our Holy Father suffered the assignation attempt, colon surgery to remove an orange-sized tumor, dislocation of his right shoulder and fracturing its socket, slipping in the bathroom and breaking his hip and surgery to remove his appendix. Shortly after all of this, the world was to watch him heroically suffer from Parkinson’s disease. In a homily just days after his death, Cardinal Ruini recalled, “He was totally consecrated to Mary; he proved how authentic this consecration was when, on awakening from the anesthetic after his tracheotomy, he wrote immediately, ‘To Mary...I once again entrust myself: *Totus Tuus!*’” (www.vatican.va, Cardinal Camillo Ruini).

However much he suffered, he never lost his sense of humor. A couple stories will prove how well he accepted his sufferings.

“After injuring his right shoulder, he had to wear a sling for about four weeks, he joked with others saying he could bless just as effectively with his left hand” (Szulc, 42).

“In November 1994 he joked about his newly acquired walking cane with a group of people in Siracusa. ‘Are you pro-cane or anti-cane?’ he asked. ‘Some say it makes me look older. Others, that it rejuvenate me...Ah, I see you are pro-cane!...I’m preparing to go to Manila with my cane. I’ll get there and I think my cane will, too’ “ (Szulc, 487).

Looking closely at his life, it is not hard to see how the Heart of Mary was entwined with the heart of our late Holy Father. He often quoted the text from the nineteenth chapter of John’s Gospel: “Standing by the cross of Jesus were His Mother and His Mother’s sister, Mary. The wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw His Mother and the disciple He loved standing near, He said to His Mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then, He said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your Mother!

And from that hour the disciple took Her in his own home.” It is from this text that he based his coat of arms. How can we not be grateful for his life-long example of devotion to Mary?

In April of 2003, the Holy Father announced the theme for the eighteenth World Youth Day: “*Behold your Mother!*” (John 19:27).

I think it fitting that we conclude this evening with his message on the above theme: “When His ‘hour’ had come, Jesus from the cross gave Mary His Mother to the disciple John, making her, through the disciple He loved, Mother of all believers, Mother of us all. Behold, Jesus says, to each one of us, Behold Mary, My Mother, who from this day becomes your Mother too! This is why I want to entrust you to Mary. Dear Friends, and I tell you from experience, open the doors of your life to her! Do not be afraid to open wide the doors of your heart to Christ through the one who wants to bring you to Him, so that you may be saved from sin and death! She will help you to listen to His voice and say “yes” to every plan that God conceives for you, for your good and for that of all humanity.” (www.vatican.va, John Paul ii).

In every circumstance of our life, may we too, echo our Holy Father saying to Mary *Totus Tuus*. Amen.

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