
A TRIBUTE TO POPE JOHN PAUL II



I shall always remember the two particular audiences the Holy Father gave me, as bishop of Edmundston, the first one in 1993 and the second one in 1999. The archbishop of Moncton had just finished meeting with the Pope, and John Paul II asked me what connection there was if any between the diocese of Edmundston and the archdiocese of Moncton. I hastened to tell him how much I had appreciated the homily he gave, in Moncton. To which the Holy Father immediately replied: "It was September 13, 1984, on the feast day of St. John Chrysostom." I was amazed at his extraordinary memory. Since the Holy Father's death, I have re-read this homily a few times, and rather than giving you his biography, I shall give you excerpts of this homily he gave to the New Brunswick Catholics: may these words help us revitalise our Christian communities! They also give us a portrait of Pope John Paul II.

UNITED TO CHRIST

St. John Chrysostom, the Pope stated, "drew his eloquence from the power of his faith. And his faith, filled with love, called forth his apostolic zeal. In fact, his pastoral zeal was based on union with Christ. This relationship was particularly close when the great bishop of Constantinople was exposed to suffering and persecution. He too could say, following Saint Paul: 'We carry with us in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus, too, may always be seen in our body.' This union to Christ's suffering and dying on the Cross made his apostolic service efficacious and a source of supernatural life for others. John Chrysostom had no fear of unjust judgements, of harassment, of defamation, of persecution. These merely made him more firm in his proclamation of the requirements of the Gospel, both because of his loyalty to Christ and because of his love for those he wished to convert. He truly lived the words of Christ recorded in the Gospel of Luke: 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly.' His eloquence made him popular with the crowds; his frankness, however, drew down upon him the hatred of some. He had devoted his gift of speech entirely to the service of justice and charity, for which he paid dearly, in heart and body. Yet he did not allow this to turn him away from loving others and from seeking to do them good. He gave with no thought of return: 'Do good and lend without hoping for anything in return... Give and it will be given to you.' Rather than see his followers spill the blood of his fellow citizens, he chose to surrender himself to the soldiers. This is the pastor, dear brothers and sisters, who formed a generation of Christians in a large part of the East, through his preaching and by the example of his life. This is the witness that is presented to you today as you seek to strengthen your church communities.

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Pope John Paul continued his homily to all the New Brunswick Catholics in these words: "Vatican II spoke of the 'Christian community' as a sign of the presence of God in the world. "By the eucharistic sacrifice it is on the way to the Father with Christ, carefully nourished by the Word of God, it bears witness to Christ; it walks in love and glows with an apostolic spirit." May your parishes and your various communities carry out this program! But that it may be done according to the Gospel, it might be well to listen once again to John Chrysostom expressing his faith: 'Am I relying on my own strength? I possess his word; that is my support, my security and my harbour of peace.' Steep yourself in this word, he added, 'you must continually find your strength in the Scriptures.' He also asks us to pray unceasingly, everywhere, in the temple of God which is the human heart.

PASTORAL APPROACHES

"John Chrysostom took great care in preparing candidates for baptism and above all in helping the baptised to understand the greatness of the gift given them by God in the sacrament. He speaks in enthusiastic terms of the Eucharist by which we share in the Easter victory. But he never forgets that 'the first road to conversion

is the condemnation of our faults. Begin by confessing your faults in order to be justified.' This insistence of John Chrysostom on the gift of grace, on faith, prayer and the sacraments, invariably issues in a statement of the requirements for Christian living; if not we would be faced with a lack of logic or with hypocrisy. And it is in this connection that he speaks with surprising vigour and charity, of the love of neighbour. This love is reconciliation. This love is will for unity and for fraternity. This love is respect and welcome for the poor: 'You wish to honour the body of Christ? Do not hold it in contempt when it is naked. Do not honour it here, in church, by wearing silken robes while you allow it to remain outside suffering from the cold and lack of clothes.' Love involves apostolic work: it is missionary zeal that extends to the ends of the earth. God does not ask us to succeed, but to work..."

CHALLENGES FOR TODAY

"These few strong words from St. John Chrysostom are evidence of the faith, charity, apostolic courage and hope which he sought to share with his brothers and sisters. Dear brothers and sisters of New Brunswick, is it still necessary for the progress of your communities for these exhortations to be articulated in terms of challenges adapted to our times? You can look to the future with serenity if you stand firm in the faith of the Risen Christ, if you allow his Spirit to form within you the responses to the new challenges, if you show solidarity with one another, if you accept being a leaven in the Church and in society. And your Christian communities will immediately take up the challenge if they are able to form and deepen the faith of their members through the catechesis of youth and of students, through the continuing formation of adults, through courses and retreats. It is a question of a faith that is personal attachment to the living God and takes account of the whole creed. Do not allow religious ignorance to stand side by side with the prestige of secular knowledge! Your communities will progress and be renewed if you accord greater place to meditation on the Gospel, to prayer, to the sacraments of the Eucharist and of Penance. It is evident that a well-understood faith involves all the commitments of charity of which the Pastor of Constantinople spoke and which today might be called: respect for persons, of their freedom, of their dignity; respect for human rights, the right to one's reputation, the right to development, the right to freedom of conscience; the refusal of violence and torture; establishment of social measures for greater equality and justice, for all men and women, regardless of individual interests or privileges; the will to live a simple life and to share; a more universal openness towards the basic needs of the less fortunate countries; and missionary zeal for help among the Churches."

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