Memories of my Encounters with Blessed John Paul II

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It was with considerable emotion and an acute sense of responsibility that I accepted the request of Mother M. Jana, the Superior General, to write about my memories of the Holy Father, Blessed John Paul II. This is not an easy task as it is virtually impossible for me to adequately recount in words the emotions and experiences that I had during my numerous encounters with the Pope throughout almost the entire period of his Pontificate. Nonetheless, I will attempt, as best I can, to share some of these memories with you in a very abridged form.

I first met the Holy Father several times during my visitation of our Congregation in Poland, when he was still a cardinal in Cracow. However, my most frequent encounters with him took place at our Generalate in Rome during Second Vatican Council. He would come to our convent to celebrate Holy Mass on various festive occasions and would sometimes work silently all day long spending a lot of time on prayer in our chapel. Conversations with him always left a deep impression on me. Here was a man whose simple presence spoke of God. In October 1978 I went to greet him at Fiumicino airport, when he arrived for the Conclave following the sudden death of John Paul I. I remember only too well his face heavy in thought and his words at that time. They expressed total confidence in God’s Providence for the very difficult times that the Church was going through at that period.

My first encounter with the Holy Father, as Pope, was on September 8, 1979, in Loreto, in Italy, on his pilgrimage to the Marian sanctuary, subsequent to his election as successor to Peter’s Chair. As a member of the General Council of the Congregation, I had the privilege of greeting him in our house on behalf of our Superior General who was unable to be present. The Holy Father came to see us after his visit to the War Cemetery, where Polish soldiers were buried following the battles on the Adriatic coast in World War II. Our small Loretan community had the immense joy of meeting the smiling and dynamic Vicar of Christ. Our joy was all the more intense as this visit had not been planned by the Vatican. The Holy Father had himself spontaneously decided to come to our Convent. On entering the house which he knew so well from numerous previous visits, the Holy Father made his way to the chapel where he stayed in prayer for a long time. Afterwards, he gave us his apostolic blessing and spoke cordially to each one of us. He halted for a few minutes in the lounge where we cleaned off the dust that had accumulated on his shoes from his visit to the cemetery and gave him the Visitors’ Book which he signed with pleasure. During this time a crowd had gathered outside. He left us accompanied by the enthusiastic applause of the Sisters as well as that of the pilgrims gathered in the street. He blessed everyone and embraced the children that were handed to him. He had passed through our house like a flash and left memories of his visit in the hearts of the Sisters for ever. Memorable photographs of this historical encounter with the Holy Father can be found in our Loreto Nazareth.

The last time that I saw the Holy Father was in the year 2001. It was at the Audience in which I participated as a member of the Council of the International Union of Superior Generals (UISG). How different he was at that time! Despite the marks of suffering, bent with illness and physical incapacity, and almost at the end of his life, he impressed everyone by his unusual dignity and heroic acceptance of the experience of the Cross.
as the Will of the Most High. He symbolized the suffering world. He talked to me for a few minutes expressing as lively an interest as ever in the state of our Congregation and he remembered Wadowice and Cracow with undiminished gratitude. With a trembling hand, he offered me a rosary and asked for prayer. As I said farewell to the Holy Father I was unable to hide my emotions. For a long time I kept the picture of this encounter in my heart and it remains engraved in my memory.

In the same year on July 9, I also had the privilege of meeting John Paul II at the Audience for the XXI General Chapter of our Congregation. In response to my greetings delivered in the name of the attending Delegates, the Holy Father gave a short but inspiring reply. It was evident that he was in a weak physical condition. With fatherly kindness he handed me his Letter addressed to the Chapter. The gist of his message was: “Help families to open up to Christ”. The Sisters sung with joy and each approached His Holiness personally and received his blessing and a rosary. This was the last time I was to meet and to talk to the Pontiff. No words can describe the emotions that transpired in my heart on our departure from the Vatican.

What can I say about the many meetings with the Holy Father that took place between the two above-mentioned dates? Each one of them left a trace in my mind which despite the passing years has not faded. My first visit to the Holy Father on his feast-day, just after his election, made a considerable and unforgettable impression on me. Our Superior General, Mother Medarda Synakowska and her Council, of which I was a member, was invited to Holy Mass to be celebrated in the Holy Father’s private chapel. This was the first time I had been in this remarkable place. We saw on entering that the Holy Father was already in the chapel. We were impressed by his white figure in humble dialogue with his Lord, who by the power of his words would become present on the altar. Everyone’s attention was drawn to the prayerful presence of the Holy Father. I gazed at this form so full of mysteries and searched for similarities between the kneeling Supreme Pastor and the mosaics representing the martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul, above the altar. For some strange reason, I was unable to prevent myself from thinking that the Pope kneeling beside me carried the marks of both of these examples of the love of Christ. Holy Mass celebrated by the Vicar of Christ was a tremendous experience for me. I also had the privilege of being asked to do the Reading and the Psalm during the liturgical celebration. Thanksgiving after Holy Communion lasted some time and it was obvious from the Holy Father’s stance that he was communicating with Someone who was present and alive.

At the end of Holy Mass, Father Dziwisz invited us to the Holy Father’s private library. Not long afterwards John Paul II appeared in the doorway and repeated with a big smile: „Nazareth Sisters, my Nazareth Sisters”. Our emotions knew no end! Once the greetings were over, I handed him a bouquet of lily-of-the-valley to remind him of “the land of his childhood”. He was touched by this gesture and took it with gratitude. Then, with fatherly concern, the Holy Father approached each one of us to exchange a few words. At that moment I felt obliged to pass on a message from Sr. Bernarda Krzczkowska, the Provincial Superior from Cracow. Sr. Bernarda had asked me to tell him that she missed him and wept for the cardinal, she had collaborated with for so many years in Cracow, particularly for the foundation of the first house for Single Mothers, which had been one of his special priorities. The Holy Father listened attentively and then reiterated: „She is crying? Crying? Tell her that the Pope is also weeping, alone in the Vatican, so far from his country. Give her that message and my greetings. This meeting with the Vicar of Christ at the start of his Pontificate was so full of happiness and emotion that it remained inscribed in our hearts and certainly encouraged us to even greater prayer for the Successor of Christ on earth.

As I reflect on the years of his long Pontificate I recall a multitude of meetings with him. Frequently, Father Dziwisz would invite the General Council for the Holy Father’s feast-day. On several occasions both of the Nazareth communities in Rome, were invited to the Vatican for the feast of the Holy Family. During Holy Mass, the Sisters’ choir would sing traditional carols and, in the library, we would sing the Holy
Father’s favourite carol: “Oj Maluśki, Maluśki”. We have many memorable photographs that were taken on these occasions with the Holy Father. During each of the Chapters that I participated in we always had an opportunity for the delegates to meet with the Head of the Church. Apart from these general meetings I was fortunate enough to represent Nazareth for the annual Christmas Eve greetings, when the Holy Father shared the wafer of peace and love (oplatek) with Polish people in Paul VI Hall. There were so many of these exceptional opportunities to see the Pope close at hand!

The meetings with the Holy Father that had the most profound impact on me were on March 5 and 6, 2000, both during and after the Beatification of our Martyred Sisters from Nowogródek. I am incapable of describing the enthusiasm, emotion, joy and gratitude that I experienced for the extraordinary grace accorded to our Martyred Sisters. In the conversation I had with the Holy Father during the General Audience, the day after the Beatification, I shared all my heartfelt sentiments with him. With truly fatherly feeling he too thanked God for our Blessed Martyrs commending them as an example of evangelical love for families for whom they had sacrificed even their lives.

The remarkable personality of John Paul II is an inexhaustible source of divine-human connections. I always considered him to be close to and, even, a reflection of God, who spoke so clearly and who manifested Himself through the gestures of his Servant. What struck me most of all was his intensive prayerfulness that was so full of mystery. He not only prayed, he was prayer. He lived and acted as though the heavens were always open to him. He taught us the wisdom of the cross through his example. He taught us how to live and to die. My encounters with Blessed John Paul II were so numerous and varied, that they cannot all be enumerated. Meetings with him were like a Sacrament. He always expressed great respect and interest for every human being. Every person was for him a sacred space, spatium sacrum. In every situation he gave the impression that he was a pastor of souls. Indeed he was the Sacerdos Magnus and Pontifex. He both spoke of and taught God via his own personality.

To conclude these memories, I would like to thank God for the grace of my encounters with Blessed John Paul II. I pray that through his intercession we may all be anchored in God just as the Holy Father showed us by example through his holy life.