

Divine Mercy Sunday: Homily 2011

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What is the measure of greatness in a man? I propose this question to you, dear people, on the occasion of the beatification of Pope John Paul II, by any standard, one of most important and influential figures of the 20th century. We are familiar with some of his achievements: many think he was the pivotal figure in the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; he traveled extensively and tirelessly around the world to evangelize; he gave us the first universal catechism in almost 500 years; many priests and religious attribute their vocations directly to him...this was certainly true of several of the men with whom I studied in the seminary. His impact over one of the three longest pontificates in Church history was and remains vast.

But my question is directed less toward his accomplishments than toward his character, toward what made John Paul an effective instrument in the hands of providence. To suggest an answer to the question of why he was such a great figure, I refer to what I think was Pope John Paul's greatest encyclical (he gave the Church 14 of them): *Veritatis Splendor*, the Splendor of Truth. In this encyclical, the Pope addressed the nature and scope of human freedom, and he reminded the Church and the world that only truth can preserve freedom... otherwise, the gift of our freedom will be disfigured and perhaps even lost by selfishness and the abuse of power. We know we live under what John Paul's closest collaborator and successor, Pope Benedict, has called the "dictatorship of relativism," which John Paul described as, "a lack of trust in the wisdom of God." (VS 84) The problem of moral relativism is not new in human history: Jesus Himself confronted it during His Passion. "For this I was born," the Lord told Pontius Pilate, "and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth." (Jn 18:37) And the Roman procurator answered with as much disinterest as malice: "What is truth?" (Jn 18:38)

Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus had reassured us that, "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free." (Jn 8:32) In other words, the truth about God and man can be known securely through faith and reason, and the embrace of truth promotes the gift everyone treasures: the *freedom* to act rightly, to transform oneself by moral action and so grow in virtue, to respond to love with love.

In the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul wrote, "The Crucified Christ reveals the authentic meaning of freedom; He lives it fully in the total gift of Himself and calls His disciples to share in His freedom." (VS 85) By precept and example, Jesus Christ taught us a simple, though no less profound truth about our humanity: because we are "blessedly incomplete," in the words of one wise man, we can find purpose and joy in this life *only through self-giving*. The Gospel formula to finding our way in this world is really very straightforward: we discover our dignity as children of God through the revelation of God in Jesus Christ; the grace of the Paschal Mystery makes it possible for us to live as faithful sons and daughters of our Father in Heaven; and the Cross of Christ inspires the human heart to ever greater heights of self-forgetfulness and self-gift. Jesus Christ lived an intensely happy human life, because He made a complete and generous offering of His life to His Father. There was no selfishness in Him.

But we know differently about ourselves. With great humility, St Paul writes, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Rom 7:19) In other words, sin is the enemy of freedom, because it is the very opposite of truth. Didn't Jesus call Satan, "a liar and the father of lies"? (Jn 8:44) The devil's greatest lie was to our first parents: "You will be like God," (Gen 3:5), meaning man, without regard for his Creator, would [attempt to] be "an absolute principle unto himself." (VS 86) Here is the origin of all sin: I make myself the measure of right and wrong. This is moral relativism, to which we are all vulnerable in some form...that distrust in God's goodness and wisdom. Distrust leads to rebellion. The "sin that dwells within me," as St Paul writes (Rom 7:20), reveals itself in self-centeredness and lack of regard for the other, a moral and spiritual lethargy in the search for truth, an unwillingness to make sacrifices and to give myself. These are the enemies of freedom and therefore, the enemies of human happiness.

Jesus Christ shows us a different way...indeed, the most noble way: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (Jn 15:15) To pattern one's life on the Master is the aim and desire of the soul striving for holiness, for sanctity. And now, through today's beatification ceremony, Our Mother the Church has assured us of the sanctity, fidelity, and heroic virtue of Pope John Paul, and she formally commends his life as a model to us. The Church confirms that he lived what he taught in *Veritatis Splendor*: "the full meaning of freedom [is to be found in]: the gift of self in service to God and one's brethren." (VS 87) "I will gladly spend and be spent for your souls," St Paul wrote to the Corinthians (II Cor 12:15). John Paul gave flesh to these words...yet not without cost.

Jesus suffered because of the *infidelity* of those He had called to Himself, of those who were the beneficiaries of the generosity of God, His Chosen People. He was betrayed by one of His closest associates. In Matthew's Gospel, Our Lord prophesied, "...and a man's foes will be those of his own household." (10:36) And so it was that the Savior went to Calvary at the hands of His own.

"Martyrdom is an outstanding sign of the holiness of the Church," (VS 93) John Paul wrote in the Splendor of Truth. In a fallen world, which more and more echoes the voice of Pilate—"What is truth?"—the Gospel calls for "a consistent witness which all Christians must daily be ready to make, even at the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice." (VS 93) In a sense, we are not surprised by the resistance of the world to the light of truth, even though Jesus told us, "In the world, you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (Jn 16:33) But we can be surprised, and even dismayed—as was the Lord Himself (cf. Lk 19:41,41)—by an egregious lack of fidelity to Christ by those who are united to Him in Baptism and Confirmation, by the vows of Holy Matrimony, by the promises of Holy Orders, and by the vows of religious life.

Like the Master, Pope John Paul suffered because to a great extent, modern culture prefers darkness to light. (cf. Jn 3:19) But he suffered most for infidelity, for betrayal, within the household of God...and I am thinking particularly of priests and religious who through grievous immorality or dissent from Church teaching, cause grave scandal and so wound charity in the Mystical Body.

So to return to the question with which we started: I think the greatness of Blessed John Paul II lies in his fidelity to Our Lord in what we might call, "a martyrdom for truth." In this, he gives an example that each of us, out of love for Jesus Christ, must follow: that we bear witness to the truth to the point of personal suffering and sacrifice.

In God's providence, Pope John Paul's beatification falls on the Second Sunday of Easter, which he designated as Divine Mercy Sunday. The Gospel for today recounts the institution of the Sacrament of Penance, through which we have access to the ocean of mercy found in the Sacred Heart of Jesus for fallen man. In *Veritatis Splendor*, the Holy Father wrote, "Having come not judge the world but to save it, [Jesus] was uncompromisingly stern towards sin, but patient and rich in mercy towards sinners." (VS 95)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, today we give thanks for the life of Blessed Pope John Paul II, and for the graces the Church received through his hands and heart. And we examine our consciences in the light of his example, to verify our charity and fidelity and willingness to suffer for the One who is Truth and who promised us His forgiveness where we have fallen short.