

**Homily for the Establishment of the Shrine of Pope St. John Paul II
Our Lady Mother of the Church Polish Mission
Willow Springs, Illinois**

**Memorial of Pope St. John Paul II
October 22, 2014**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here on this special occasion as we gather to dedicate this shrine to Pope St. John Paul II, a saint dear to the hearts of the Polish people and indeed to the Universal Church. The location of this shrine here at Our Lady Mother of the Church Polish Mission could not be more fitting, as our beloved saint's pontificate was lived in the maternal embrace of Our Lady, as reflected in his papal motto: *Totus Tuus, Mater Ecclesiae* – All yours, Mother of the Church.

“Feed my sheep” (John 21:17) These are the words given by Our Lord to St. Peter, our first pope, and they are words that continue to be addressed to him through his successors, the popes. Today, we celebrate the feast day of one of the great successors of St. Peter, Pope St. John Paul II, who fed the sheep of Christ in the Church as the pope for over 26 years,

the third longest pontificate in the nearly 2000 year history of the Church. Pope St. John Paul II fed the Church in so many remarkable ways, ways that will continue to benefit us for centuries to come.

At the very beginning of his pontificate, there was one phrase that he said which continued to resonate throughout his entire pontificate. During his inauguration homily, he said those familiar words: "Do not be afraid."¹ And this was not just an empty phrase, but throughout his time as pope, he continued to repeat these words and taught the Church, and indeed taught the world, how to live them, setting an example through his life, his ministry, and in a particular way, through his very rich teaching.

"Do not be afraid." One of the first things that the pope did was to confront the imposing shadow that communism had cast on many parts of the world. Throughout his life, Karol Wojtyla lived under the shadow of oppressive governments but failed to be intimidated by them. As a young man growing up in Poland, he was constantly being challenged by the Nazi regime which had taken over Poland in 1939. He never gave into the propaganda, but always saw the error of such a system. He entered an underground seminary to study for the priesthood. Then as a priest, and later as a bishop and archbishop, Wojtyla stuck to his faith and quietly but

effectively fed the sheep of his flock with the truth of the dignity of man and the inherent errors in communism.

A remarkable example of this boldness came in 1959 when he was the Archbishop of Krakow. On the outskirts of the city of Krakow, the communists erected an area known as *Nowa Huta* which was intended to be a model communist city. It was to be a city without God. It was therefore forbidden to build any churches in this new city. In response to this, Wojtyla celebrated Christmas Midnight Mass in a cold, open field surrounded by thousands of the faithful. He would continue this for many years, sending a message to the communists that he would not back down, while at the same time giving the Poles hope and courage to stand firm in their opposition to communism.

When he was elected pope, one of his first trips was back to his homeland of Poland where he was welcomed by millions. His presence in his native land helped the people to regain their identity and to stand up against communism in a peaceful, but effective way. His fearless confrontation of communism was one of the key forces in helping to bring about the end of communism in Europe.

What a great example and witness to the world and to us that we need not be afraid of whatever might happen in this world, because we have the promise that Christ gave to Peter, our first pope, that “the gates of the netherworld shall never prevail against” (Matthew 16:18) the Church, no matter how grim things can seem. Pope St. John Paul II taught the world to have hope.

Pope St. John Paul II also taught us to not be afraid of the truth of love. Probably one of the greatest lasting intellectual legacies that he will be remembered for is his work on what is called the Theology of the Body. In a series of Wednesday audiences over several years, he explained for us the true meaning of love, the dignity of the human person, and the dignity of marriage.

In the midst of a culture that has been so misguided on so many issues with regard to this great gift of love, the Holy Father has changed the common perception that the Church’s teachings on these topics is just about saying ‘no, no, no.’ Instead, he has shown us how love is about a ‘yes’, a total gift of self to the other which, when lived according to God’s plan for marriage, can bring about the true peace and joy that God so freely gives to those who spend the rest of their lives together. He reminds us to

not be afraid of knowing and following the truth, even when those truths are not accepted by the vast majority of those around us. As Christ reminds us, by knowing the truth, we are set free (cf. John 8:32), free to love authentically and completely in the way that He intended.

And although Pope St. John Paul II has taught us so much more to not be afraid of, let me offer just one more example, and that is his message about not being afraid to suffer. In 1984, he wrote one of the most profound and beautiful descriptions of the Christian meaning of human suffering in his Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, *Salvifici doloris*. In that letter, he explained that the so-called mystery of suffering can only find meaning in light of our faith in Christ Jesus, whose suffering brought about the redemption of the world.

He explained how our suffering is not something to be avoided at all costs, or just to endure, but rather that our suffering has true meaning, for when we unite it to the suffering of Christ, we share in the redemption of the world. When we offer that suffering to Him, we do something greater for the Body of Christ than we could ever do otherwise.

These words of Pope St. John Paul II, once again, were not empty, but the whole world was able to see how he lived this message in a beautiful

and heroic way as he suffered so much in his final years. One cannot forget the image of him at his balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square on Easter morning the week before he died. He was to the point where he could not even speak, but he reached out to the people and to the world with his hands to impart his blessing. What a powerful witness to faith, showing us that with that faith firmly rooted in Christ Jesus, there is absolutely nothing that cannot be overcome, no cross which is too heavy for us to bear, for we never bear them alone, but always with Christ our Redeemer, and in doing so, we share in His gift of salvation.

And so we give thanks and praise for this great man who has taught us to not be afraid, but has given us an example of how to have faith, how to have hope, and how to love. May the example of his life encourage us to cast behind us all of the fears that we have and, as he was also fond of saying, "open wide the doors of our hearts for Christ."² By doing this, we prepare ourselves to be with him and with all of the saints in the everlasting peace, joy, and glory of the Kingdom of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope St. John Paul II, Homily for the Inauguration of his Pontificate, 22 October 1978.

² *Ibid.*