

SAINT JOHN PAUL THE GREAT

H i s F i v e L o v e s



JASON EVERT

Foreword by Swiss Guard Mario Enzler

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JOHN PAUL
THE GREAT

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Totus Tuus
— P R E S S —

JASON EVERT

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The Making of the Pope of the Millennium: Kalendarium of the Life of Karol Wojtyla © 2000 Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception of the B.V.M. All Rights Reserved. Used with Permission.

Published by Totus Tuus Press and Lighthouse Catholic Media
PO Box 280021
Lakewood, CO 80228

Distributed by Ignatius Press
Cover design by Devin Schadt
Typesetting by Loyola Dataworks
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-9913754-0-0 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-0-9913754-1-7 (paperback)
Library of Congress Control Number: 2013958271

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THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

Between 5:00 and 5:30 A.M.—and sometimes as early as 4:00—Pope John Paul II would arise each morning, keeping virtually the same schedule he had as the bishop of Kraków. Although he enjoyed watching the sunrise, the main reason for his early start was to make time for prayer. He prayed the Rosary prostrate on the floor or kneeling, followed by his personal prayers, and would then go to the chapel in order to prepare for 7:30 Mass. According to his press secretary, Joaquín Navarro-Valls, his sixty to ninety minutes of private prayer before Mass were the best part of his day.

At the chapel, he would kneel before the Blessed Sacrament at his prie-dieu. The top of his wooden kneeler could be opened, and it was brimming with notes people had given to him, seeking his prayers for all kinds of petitions, including healings, the conversion of family members, or successful pregnancies. Perhaps thirty to forty new petitions were given to him each day, and he would pray specifically over every one. He said that they were kept there and were always present “in my consciousness, even if they cannot be literally repeated every day.”

He told one of his biographers, “There was a time when I thought that one had to limit the ‘prayer of petition.’ That time has passed. The further I advance along the road

mapped out for me by Providence, the more I feel the need to have recourse to this kind of prayer." Quite often, those who sent the petitions wrote back in thanksgiving for answered prayers. His assistant secretary noted that most of them expressed gratitude for the gift of parenthood. Not only did he intercede before the tabernacle for these individuals as if they were his most intimate friends, he routinely sought information about the progress of the cases. The liturgy would not begin until he had before him the petitions people had asked him to offer on their behalf.

After going to the sacristy to don his vestments for Mass, he would again kneel or sit for ten to twenty minutes. When visitors arrived to join him for Mass, they would always find him kneeling in prayer. Some said, "he looked like he was speaking with the Invisible." One of the masters of ceremonies added, "it seemed as if the Pope were not present among us." Bishop Andrew Wypych, who was ordained to the diaconate by Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, added, "You could see that he physically was there, but one could sense that he was immersed in the love of the Lord. They were united in talking to each other."

During the celebration of the Eucharist, one observer noticed, "He lingered lovingly over every syllable that recalled the Last Supper as if the words were new to him." Then, after the moment of Consecration, he would genuflect before Christ's presence on the altar with tremendous reverence. Visitors to his private Masses noticed that you could hear the thud of his knee slamming down upon the marble floor when he became too weak to support himself as he genuflected. After Mass, a lengthy time of thanksgiving followed before the Holy Father greeted guests and gave each of them a Rosary.

The Eucharist was the principal reason for his priesthood. He said, "For me, the Mass constitutes the center of my life and my every day." He added, "nothing means more to me or gives me greater joy than to celebrate Mass each day and to serve God's people in the Church." John Paul didn't merely offer the Mass. He lived it. Like the Eucharist itself, he became an immolation of love—a living sacrifice offered to the Father for the salvation of mankind.

Because of his deep faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, he was adamant with priests and bishops about how the Mass ought to be celebrated. He told a group of American bishops, "This is why it is so important that liturgical law be respected. The priest, who is the servant of the liturgy, not its inventor or producer, has a particular responsibility in this regard, lest he empty liturgy of its true meaning or obscure its sacred character."

Prayer was the rhythm of the Holy Father's life. He made time to pray before and after his meals, and interspersed his Breviary prayers (the Liturgy of the Hours) throughout the day and night, calling it: "very important, *very* important." At six in the morning, at noon, and again at six in the evening, he would stop whatever he was doing to pray the Angelus, just as he had done while working in the chemical plant in Poland. He prayed several Rosaries each day, went to confession every week, and did not let a day pass without receiving Holy Communion. Each Friday (and every day in Lent), he prayed the Stations of the Cross, and preferred to do this in the garden on the roof of the Papal Apartments. During Lent, he would eat one complete meal a day, and always fasted on the eve of our Lady's feast days. He remarked, "If the bishop doesn't set an example by fasting, then who will?" The Holy Father

knew that his first duty to the Church was his interior life. He declared, “the shepherd should walk at the head and lay down his life for his sheep. He should be the first when it comes to sacrifice and devotion.”

Each night, he looked out his window to Saint Peter’s Square and to the whole world, and made the sign of the cross over it, blessing the world goodnight. For many years, he ascended to the roof of the Papal Apartments to offer this nightly blessing. Visitors standing in the square noticed that his light often went off between eleven and one in the morning. One of his biographers noted that he seldom went to bed before midnight. As a priest and bishop, and perhaps as pope, he sometimes slept on the bare floor. In Kraków, his housekeeper knew of this, and noticed that he would crumple his bed sheets to conceal it.

The Old Lion

More remarkable than his daily, weekly, and annual traditions of prayer was his habit of incessant prayer. While walking from place to place inside the Vatican or outside, prayer became as natural and vital to him as his breath. While strolling to his next appointment, Archbishop Mieczysław Mokrzycki said, “he was immersed in prayer for those five minutes. He was then beyond our reach, turned off. There were dozens of moments like that during the day. We knew that we were not supposed to disturb the Holy Father then because he was with God. They were united in an unusual way.” He added that John Paul’s mysticism was evidenced by the fact that he would “disconnect” himself from his surroundings and appeared oblivious to external distractions. Cardinal Dziwisz noticed that even times of work were “peppered with prayers, with

short bursts of prayer.” One member of the Curia noted, “No sooner does he pause than he starts praying . . .”

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn observed:

The Holy Father looked as though he never stopped praying. I never saw anyone so constantly immersed in union with Christ and God, as though it were a permanent state that led him to submit everything he did unto the Lord’s hands. His attentiveness to others, his gestures, words and readings—everything he did was bathed in prayer, like the great mystics.

It could be said that he didn’t make time to enter prayer. Rather, he made time for the sake of others to come out of it.

Because he believed that every encounter was providential, he stated, “As soon as I meet people, I pray for them.” Those who had the blessing of meeting him in person would not be surprised by this information, based upon how fully present he was to each person he encountered. One of his secretaries affirmed this: “He prayed for everyone he met. He prayed before and after the meeting.” This didn’t apply only to formal meetings, as he could often be seen praying the Rosary as he waved at crowds from his Popemobile.

However, what’s more fascinating than when the Pope prayed or what he prayed, is how he prayed. While hiking atop the Italian Alps, Dziwisz told the guide, “Lino, the Holy Father wants to be alone for a little while in recollection, let’s look for a good spot.” They noticed a large flat rock and guided him over to it. The guide explained what happened next in his book, *The Secret Life of John Paul II*:

It was then that I witnessed for the first time something I will truly never forget, and that—overcoming my reservations—I am telling here for the first time. I seek to do so accurately and with purity of heart. His head was bowed and he was absorbed in prayer, totally immobile, without even the slightest movement. He was in a sort of trance—or I dare say, ecstasy—which he was modestly hiding from us. In fact, I couldn't see his face or even tell whether his hands were folded or not. Nor if his eyes were open or closed. Instead, I had the very clear sensation that I was observing someone endowed with a spiritual power that was no longer human; someone who no longer belonged to this world, but was living those minutes in complete communion with God, with the saints, and with all the souls of heaven. The unreal sparkle of the snow all around emphasized this impression. A complete silence had descended. Everything was motionless, as if a state of contemplation had taken hold of every element of nature. . . . He never moved so much as a millimeter, his muscles were motionless like everything else around him. Then, the strangest thing occurred. The Pope, after [the] tiniest imperceptible movement, revived and then slowly got up, and when we looked at our watches, realized that almost an hour had gone by.

Such episodes of deep prayer were commonplace, according to those who spent time with the Holy Father. In 1995, when John Paul visited the Sacred Heart Cathedral (now Basilica) in Newark, he made a visit to the Blessed Sacrament before departing. When he knelt at the prie-dieu, Cardinal McCarrick remembered:

It was my hope, my intention to kneel a little behind him. I couldn't. I couldn't. As soon as he knelt, it was like a sacred space, like a tent was around him, and I moved away. I moved three or four yards back and stood by one of the stone pillars of the cathedral. Because you had to leave space there. . . . He went into the deepest prayer. . . . I've rarely seen anyone in that state of such deep prayerfulness. He wasn't with us any more. He was with the Lord. He knelt and then in ten seconds he was gone. It was so holy, I moved back. And he was there, for about maybe seven or eight minutes, lost in total prayer.

Then, Monsignor Dziwisz took his elbow and he gently got up, turned around with a great smile, waved to the people, and walked on.

Cardinal Justin Rigali recalled a similar incident that took place in Canada when the Pope was kneeling in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, prior to the beginning of a ceremony. The master of ceremonies decided it was time for the Holy Father to wrap it up and suddenly said, "The Pope will now rise . . ." Rigali recalled what happened next:

Well, the Pope didn't rise. He just stayed put. And the poor man [the master of ceremonies], whatever got into him, it went from bad to worse: So he waited a couple of minutes, and then he made the second announcement: "The Pope will now rise." Incredible. And the Pope didn't rise. So then he just knelt down and stayed quiet. When the Pope was ready, then he rose and went on.

Sometimes when John Paul emerged from such interludes of deep prayer, he didn't seem refreshed, but was

instead preoccupied and burdened with the weight of information that others were not privy to. On one such occasion in the wilderness, a witness reported that he appeared to be “shaken to the core” and immediately requested that he descend from the mountain to return to his lodging. Within hours, the Iraqi army invaded Kuwait, and the Gulf War began.

The stirrings of John Paul’s deep interior life often manifested themselves exteriorly. Father Maciej Zięba noticed, “When he prayed, it was physical. He sighed deeply and made grunting sounds like a lion. Some of us called him the old lion. This was a mark of respect, the way you respect the king of the realm.” Countless visitors to his private chapel witnessed his unforgettable prayerful groaning as he knelt before the tabernacle. The Holy Father explained:

In order to understand profoundly the meaning of prayer, one should meditate for a long time on the following passage from the Letter to the Romans: “For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved” (Rom 8:19–24). And here again we come across the apostle’s words: “The Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but

the Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings” (cf. Rom 8:26).

From his childhood, his father instilled in Karol a strong devotion to the Holy Spirit. He recalled his father telling him, “You don’t pray to the Holy Spirit enough. You ought to pray to him.” Karol, Sr., gave him a prayer book on the Holy Spirit, which he used throughout his life, and also taught him the following prayer and instructed him to recite it daily:

Holy Spirit, I ask you for the gift of Wisdom to better know You and Your divine perfections, for the gift of Understanding to clearly discern the spirit of the mysteries of the holy faith, for the gift of Counsel that I may live according to the principles of this faith, for the gift of Knowledge that I may look for counsel in You and that I may always find it in You, for the gift of Fortitude that no fear or earthly preoccupations would ever separate me from You, for the gift of Piety that I may always serve Your Majesty with a filial love, for the gift of the Fear of the Lord that I may dread sin, which offends You, O my God.

He kept this prayer on a handwritten note, and prayed it every day for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, offering a Hail Mary and an Our Father for each of the seven gifts. He said this prayer resulted a half century later in his encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem*. His father’s witness may have given birth to an encyclical, but its greatest effects took place within the Holy Father’s soul. As Saint Louis de Montfort explained, “the greatest things on earth are done interiorly in the hearts of faithful souls.” The Pope’s relationship with the Holy Spirit was summed up best when he was asked, “How does the Pope

pray?” He answered, “You would have to ask the Holy Spirit!”

Eucharistic Amazement

Although John Paul loved communing with God in the wilderness, it was clear that his favorite place to pray was before the Blessed Sacrament. Witnesses report that he spent hours at a time—and sometimes the entire night—prostrate on the marble floor before the tabernacle, with his arms outstretched in the shape of the cross. One witness remarked that this union with our Lord in the Eucharist allowed him “not merely to speak to Christ, but actually to converse with him.” As a bishop, he told college students that for each person, the reality of the Eucharist means “we have two people in one another’s presence: Our Lord and me.”

Cardinal Dziwisz reported that you could sometimes hear him talking aloud with God, having a dialogue. The Holy Father believed that authentic prayer is when a person desires to be as attentive to God as he is to us; when one yearns to hear God’s voice, just as God yearns to hear each person. In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, he wrote, “Man achieves the *fullness of prayer* not when he expresses himself, but *when he lets God be most fully present in prayer.*”

When a tabernacle wasn’t available, John Paul would make do. One of his aides found him kneeling at a sink in a washroom because there was no other private place to prepare for Mass at the Pordenone Fair. Another witness walked into a utility closet at the Pope’s summer residence and inadvertently found him “rapt in prayer.”

The Holy Father often spent hours at a time writing before the Blessed Sacrament. He explained:

I have always been convinced that the chapel is a place of special inspiration. What a privilege to be able to live and work in the shadow of His Presence. . . . It is not always necessary to enter physically into the chapel in order to enter spiritually into the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. I have always sensed that Christ was the real owner of my episcopal residence, and that we bishops were just short-term tenants. That's how it was in Franciszkańska Street for almost twenty years, and that's how it is here in the Vatican.

In his chapel in Kraków, the kneeler was more of a prayer desk, with a desktop large enough so that he could write while kneeling or sitting before the Eucharist. A lamp was installed nearby so he could work at any time of night as well. As pope, he spent time in adoration before every Wednesday audience, and always made a short visit before and after every meal. He also spent long amounts of time before the Blessed Sacrament before and after his pilgrimages. Marathons of prayer were not unusual for him. One papal photographer recalled, "I remember that in Vilnius he prayed for six hours in a row . . ."

To John Paul, it is not enough for Catholics to receive the Eucharist. One also must contemplate it. He said that when one ponders the love that is present in the tabernacle:

. . . love is ignited within us, love is renewed within us. Therefore, these are not hours spent in idleness, when we isolate ourselves from our work, but these are moments, hours, when we undertake something that constitutes the deepest meaning of all of our work. For no matter how numerous our activities, our ministries, however numerous our concerns, our exertions—if there is no love, everything becomes meaningless.

When we devote our time to ponder the mystery of love, to allow it to radiate in our hearts, we are preparing ourselves in the best possible way for any kind of service, for any activity, for any charitable work.

His life of contemplation was the wellspring of his thoughts, words, and actions. As he said, “all activities should be rooted in prayer as though in a spiritual soil.” His job was not to advance his own opinions and agendas, but to transmit to the world the fruit of his own interior life. One of his aides noted that he made “all of his major decisions . . . on his knees before the Blessed Sacrament.” The Pope warned others, “In the absence of a deep inner life, a priest will imperceptibly turn into an office clerk, and his apostolate will turn into a parish office routine, just solving daily problems.” He knew well the primacy of “be-ing” over “do-ing,” as can be seen when he prayed: “Help us, Jesus, to understand that in order ‘to do’ in your Church, also in the field of the new evangelization that is so urgently needed, we must first learn ‘to be,’ that is, to stay with you, in your sweet company, in adoration.”

John Paul’s extravagant love for Christ in the Eucharist sometimes became problematic for his handlers. In fact, the prefect of the Papal Household often warned the organizers of papal events to make sure not to allow the Pope to pass within view of a place where the Eucharist was reserved. Otherwise, he’d surely enter the chapel for prolonged periods of time and the entire schedule would be thrown off.

In 1995, Father Michael White was invited to organize the Pope’s visit to Baltimore on behalf of the archdiocese. Prior to the Holy Father’s arrival, the chief organizer for papal pilgrimages, Father Roberto Tucci, SJ, came to

Maryland to scout out the venues and make the necessary arrangements for John Paul's trip. When he arrived at the archbishop's residence, he noticed that one of the doors in the hallway the Pope would pass through opened into a chapel with the Blessed Sacrament.

He instructed Father White, "Keep that door closed so he doesn't know there's a chapel in there." Upon the Pope's arrival, the door was closed, and John Paul took some time to eat and rest at the residence. When it was time to leave, he walked down the hall, which was lined with doors leading into various rooms, passed by the door of the chapel, then suddenly stopped. He looked back at the door, then looked over at Father Tucci, and without saying a word, wagged his finger at him and shook his head.

Father White recalled:

He's never been in this place before, never set eyes on the place, and there was nothing about the door that distinguished it in any way as a chapel. It was just one more door in a corridor of doors. But he turned right back around, he opened that door up, and he went into the chapel and he prayed.

According to Father White, the Holy Father remained in prayer long enough to "do some damage" to the schedule, then left the residence to head to his appointment.

The Holy Father ended his visit to Baltimore at St. Mary's Seminary in Roland Park. A helicopter was staged on the front lawn of the seminary to take him to the airport, where he was to meet with the vice president of the United States. A crowd of enthusiastic future priests gathered on the steps to wave at the Pope when he arrived, but John Paul's handlers were clear about the schedule: There was no time for him to make a visit. The seminary had been

begging for months to be included in the Holy Father's schedule, but time would not allow it.

However, after seeing the young men, John Paul pulled Father Tucci aside and informed him in Italian that he wanted to see the seminary—much to the amazement of that community when they were hurriedly informed. Once there, Father White was astonished that the Pope instinctively knew where to go:

He walked in the door, and this was completely unplanned and unscripted at this point. The Secret Service hadn't even done a complete sweep of the building because this wasn't part of the deal. And he just walked into that building and walked right to the chapel, like he knew where it was. It was just remarkable.

After spending a generous amount of time before the Eucharist, briefly viewing the facility, and greeting the future priests—with evident joy and absolutely no sense of urgency—he proceeded to his meeting at BWI Airport, where he had kept Vice President Gore and the entire entourage for the departure ceremony waiting!

The Pope's spiritual priorities were proof that he believed the Eucharist was the greatest treasure the Church possesses. Because of its inestimable value, he felt it was his mission to “rekindle this Eucharistic ‘amazement’” in the hearts of the faithful. To help Christians understand the reality of Christ's presence in the Blessed Sacrament, he appealed to the human experience of love. During a homily in Brazil, he asked:

How many times in our lives have we seen two people separated who love each other? During the ugly

and bitter war, in my youth, I saw young people leave without hope of return, parents torn from their homes, not knowing if they would one day find their loved ones. Upon leaving, a gesture, a picture, or an object passes from hand to hand in a certain way in order to prolong presence in absence. And nothing more. Human love is capable only of these symbols.

Motivated by an even greater love, when the hour had come for Christ to part with his disciples, he had the power to leave his Church with more than a gesture. In his absence, he left his presence. John Paul explained:

Thus, to say farewell, the Lord Jesus Christ, perfect God and perfect man, did not leave his friends a symbol, but the reality of himself. . . . Under the species of bread and wine, He is really present, with his Body and his Blood, his Soul and Divinity.

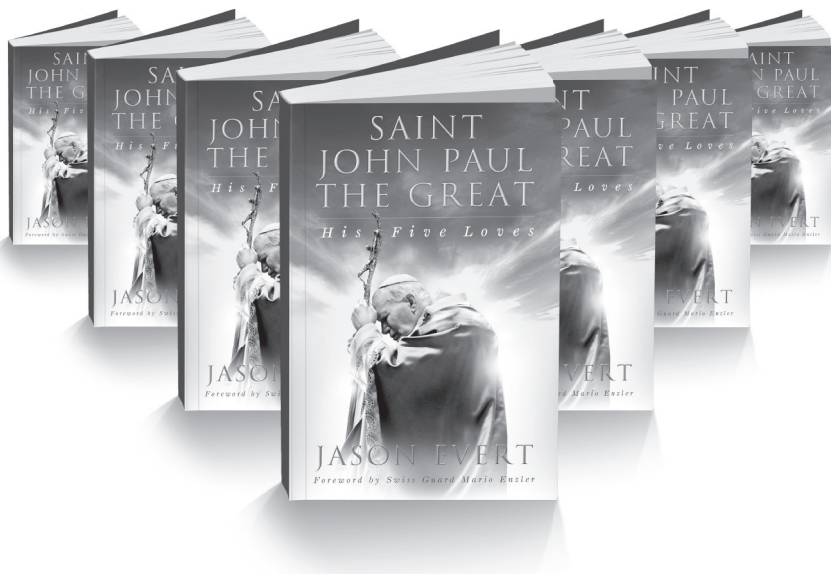
For John Paul, the question is not whether Jesus is truly present in the Blessed Sacrament, but rather whether Catholics are truly present to God in their midst! For this reason, he spoke of adoration as “an important daily practice” that one should not omit in the course of the day. He declared:

The Eucharist is the secret of my day. It gives strength and meaning to all my activities of service to the Church and to the whole world. . . . Let Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament speak to your hearts. It is he who is the true answer of life that you seek. He stays here with us: he is God with us. Seek him without tiring, welcome him without reserve, love him without interruption: today, tomorrow, forever.

If a person is unable to visit or receive the Eucharist, John Paul recommended that he or she make a spiritual communion, taking a moment to invite Jesus into one's heart.

For John Paul, the key to rekindling Eucharistic love is to look to Mary, who was the first "tabernacle" in history. In his encyclical on the Eucharist, he explained, "And is not the enraptured gaze of Mary as she contemplated the face of the newborn Christ and cradled him in her arms that unparalleled model of love which should inspire us every time we receive Eucharistic communion?"

Today, John Paul's tomb rests in the most fitting of locations: in the heart of the Church in Saint Peter's Basilica, between the Chapel of the Pietà and the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament. Even in death, he reminds the faithful of what he said in life: "Were we to disregard the Eucharist, how could we overcome our own deficiency?"



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Jason Evert has spoken about the Catholic faith to more than one million people on six continents, and is the author of more than a dozen books, including *Pure Faith*, *Theology of the Body for Teens*, and *How to Find Your Soulmate without Losing Your Soul*. He and his wife Crystalina run the website chastityproject.com and live in Colorado with their children.



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NOT FOR RESALE