

GRIEVE NOT AS THOSE WITHOUT HOPE – April 2, 2005
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"Grieve not as those who have no hope." 1 Thess. 4:13

"BE NOT AFRAID." John Paul II

As the good Pope John Paul is dying, one can only imagine the grieving of those surrounding his bed who have worked closely with the Polish pope nicknamed, "Wuja", meaning, Uncle.

With affection, bystanders pray psalms, pray for peace through the intercession of Mary, our Mother, the Mother of God, I'm sure, and may even recall the passage from T.S. Eliot's "Little Giddings:"

"We die with the dying: See, they depart and we go with them. We are born with the dead: See, they return and bring us with them."

Joined with the grief of those at the Vatican and the universal Catholic community, softly spoken words are said to break the silence that dying brings. Even the silence shouts as believers stand with John Paul now who stood up for so many so long when others chose to sit and say nothing at oppression of humans across the globe.

This champion of holiness, social justice and ecumenical relations, who perennially upholds the dignity and worth of every creature, gives way to death as John Paul ebbs his final breaths. To meet him and shake his hand as I did at Blessed Sacrament Cathedral September 18, 1987 was a cherished blessing. Bishop Dale Melczek also sent back a photo of the Pope receiving my doctoral thesis, *The Witness Value of the Visit of Pope John Paul II to Detroit*, a 22-month study six months before and after his pilgrimage and the impact this holy Shepherd had on his youthful flock in particular at Brother Rice and Marian High Schools in Birmingham, Pontiac Catholic High School, and St. Joseph Middle School in Lake Orion where I was pastor at the time. "America needs prayer," the Pope said, "if it is to save its soul." Like a good parent he could inspire and challenge his flock to grow.

With this global leader who helped bring down the wall of Communism and much more, we watch him fade and may recall the French artist, Renoir. Renoir's arthritis afflicted his entire being, making it a challenge for him to continue painting. "You have done enough. Why do you continue to torture yourself," a friend inquired.

The artist replied: "The pain passes but the beauty remains." That normal and natural process of adjusting to a significant loss of life that is dubbed as grief is like that.

John Paul's 84 years of living have certainly taught him about living and dying, suffering and surviving, and now, facing his final curtain into everlasting life. "Man will ever be anxious to know, if only in a vague way, what is the meaning of his life, his activity and his death," Karol Wojtyla wrote before being elected pope in 1978, in his book, *Sign of Contradiction*. "Be not afraid," was his motif for many to muster confidence when fear frightened them. Unafraid was John Paul as he shouted: "Peace be with you!" To the end he opposed US-led war in Iraq and

Capital Punishment as an independent thinker who reasoned outside the "status quo" although theologically he was conservative on doctrine some said. He dedicated his life to Our Lady Queen of Peace, and to Francis of Assisi as he visited those Shrines in Italy the first month of his 25-year Pontificate. His life scarred by so much conflict found him firmly planted in nonviolence and the peace of Christ alone.

All of the feelings of sad, or scared, or mad and more must be felt in Rome, here in Detroit, and elsewhere as one witnesses the demise of someone loved. Perhaps this much-loved pilgrim silently seems to say without a word:

"Help me feel my fears although I am not afraid of death's door, frustrations and laments. "It is finished," with Christ's crucifixion I join my heart. Please don't talk me out death and my need to embrace eternity. I need to wrestle with these things. Treat me as a person not a patient. Treat all with dignity. Use this opportunity to face your own fear of dying. Touch me. I need your affection and affirmation now as I have these decades, you know. Dignify my own and every other human's dying with her or his God-given worth. Tell me you love me and I love you. Don't let my appearance scare you. Please pray with me even at my last hour. Don't hide behind pious platitudes that I can't understand. Be present with me. Give me eternal rest, O God. Grant me peace. Be not afraid friends!"

In a world of glamour, glitz and the quest to be eternally young and culture's need to hide the elderly, their pain, and their dying, believers are wrapped in eerie darkness these days, I'm sure. Death is never pretty. One wants to push it away or pretend it will never happen to me. It is part of life, however. My life also. John Paul and all the dying remind of us that life on earth is short and fleeting. Eternity, however, is forever.

It's no wonder metropolitan Detroit feels close to Pope John Paul II. On September 18, 1987 he made a 24-hour visit to Detroit, Michigan, Hamtramck and Pontiac. My 135-page doctoral dissertation that surveyed the witness value of the pope's pilgrimage proved John Paul's brief appearance made a significant difference in the lives of many young people. For example, forty-five percent of the students surveyed at Brother Rice and Marian high schools in Birmingham, Pontiac Catholic High School and St. Joseph Elementary School in Lake Orion said they felt closer to the pope after the visit. Many students said they planned to put more effort into prayer (51 percent) and helping the poor (44 percent) because of John Paul.

"Peace be with you! Be not afraid of the world. Free the world from the chains of oppressive regimes, sin, selfishness and the ache of youngsters abandoned and overlooked. Stand up, you Easter people, rise, let us be on our way paving peace and hope to the hopeless."

Grieve not as those without hope, but grieve this holy man's loss who will be missed much.