



The Hundredth Anniversary of a Great Witness of Sacrificial Love

by Bro FRANCESCO DILEO OFM Cap.

Ceaseless prayer, a profound union with Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist, apostolic zeal, committed spiritual direction and a great Marian devotion. These are some of the many traits that Padre Pio and John Paul II shared. But there is another trait that with this one hundredth anniversary of Karol Wojtyła's birth, coinciding with one of the darkest times in mankind's recent history can be for us a message of faith and hope, and that is suffering.

Padre Pio's suffering – caused by sickness, attacks of the devil and a total participation in Christ's passion – are already well known to readers of this journal.

Karol Wojtyła's life too, however, was characterised constantly by severe trials. As a child and in his youth he suffered from the loss of persons dear to him: his mother when he was eight years old, his brother when he was twelve and his father when he was twenty-one. In 1939, he lived through the German occupation of Poland and some of his teachers, "respected scholars and men of culture were deported to concentration camps." Five years later he himself evaded near death when he was hit by a German truck and had to spend two weeks in hospital re-

covering from "serious head injuries." Then, when Karol Wojtyła met the young Wanda Poltawska and began directing her spiritually a "profound friendship was born as if between a brother and sister" and which became stronger when he learnt of her terrible suffering as a prisoner in the Ravensbruck concentration camp where she was used as a test subject for medical experiments. He was spared from such sufferings during the war but he believed that "these persons suffered also on his behalf." Throughout his long pontificate he suffered too. His life from 13 May 1981 onwards, after a failed assassination attempt, became a prolonged *way of the cross*, and which became always more difficult the closer he approached Calvary's summit.

Fruit of John Paul II's personal suffering was the Extraordinary Jubilee of Redemption and his apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* in which he attempted to give an answer to the question of suffering and the meaning of its existence; a question that none of us may escape and that is hard to answer, especially when one sees the "suffering of the innocent."

"Man cannot comprehend suffering entirely through reason," John Paul II wrote, "It must be accepted as a mystery," and he sought to "penetrate" that

"mystery" and to give an answer in the light of revelation and faith. "Suffering has the characteristic of a trial" one reads further on. It is "an invitation" of divine mercy, "which corrects in order to lead to conversion." But it is above all in love that is found "the fullest source of the answer to the question of the meaning of suffering. This answer has been given by God to man in the Cross of Jesus Christ [...] the roots of evil are grounded in sin and death." Thus "the Redeemer suffered in place of man and for man" and, suffering, "created the good of the world's redemption." However, "every man can by his own suffering share in the redemptive suffering of Christ too," because Redemption, accomplished through satisfactory love, remains always open to all love expressed in human suffering.

John Paul II gave an example of this in those last Sundays of his pontificate in March 2005. Voiceless because of a tracheostomy operation, he would be brought to his study window, with great difficulty and humiliation, so as to see and greet the pilgrims and to silently testify with all his strength his love for all mankind. ❖

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