

MY MEETING WITH POPE JOHN PAUL II
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That September morning was very bright in the European summer of 1991. We, the delegates of the international meeting of Jesuits in Social Communications, were called to Castel Gandolfo, the summer residence of the Pope just outside Rome. Holy Father John Paul II invited us there to meet him and celebrate the Eucharist.

Eager to meet the Pope we reached Castel Gondolfo well ahead of the appointed time and joined the Holy Father in his chapel in silent prayer and meditation for about 45 minutes. There were no Swiss guards in sight. An atmosphere of peace and homeliness prevailed everywhere. When we dressed to celebrate the Holy Mass, I found myself standing next to the Pope John Paul II on his left side.

I thought that the Holy Mass would be in Italian language with which I was very familiar then. About fifteen years ago I had done my theology studies in the Italian language in the Gregorian University at Rome. Then, in September 1980 I attended the World Congress of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) at Rome and met for the first time Holy Father face to face in the UCIP Congress just after two years of his election.

“In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti...” The Holy Father began the Mass in Latin. I panicked for a moment... and then I blessed the day I chose to study Latin during my juniorate studies at Vinayalaya, Mumbai in June 1966. Though I was very familiar with the Latin Mass I had celebrated the Holy Mass in Latin during my foreign trips earlier when Mass prayers were not available in English. So I was not a total stranger to the Holy Mass in Latin.

So after an initial panicking, a feeling of confidence came over me that I could manage the Latin prayers. As a matter of fact, I did well in saying the Latin prayers of the concelebrant alone and loudly.

The Mass was simple without any solemnity or even singing. In his short homily, if my memory is correct, the Holy Father exhorted us to be communicators filled with the Holy Spirit. “Seek our Mother Mary’s help and protection to communicate Jesus and his message with courage,” Pope John Paul exhorted us in his homily.

After the Holy Mass each delegate met the Pope one by one. He gave each one of us a rosary (prayer–beads). I wished that somebody had taken a photo of the occasion celebrating the Holy Mass standing next to the Pope. But thanks to the Pope’s photographer, I have two photos of the Holy Father giving me a rosary as a gift with his half closed eyes and a slight smile on his face.

My meeting with the Pope in person and spending a few moments with him, and asking him to bless me, my parents, my country India and all the people whom I hold dear to my heart, was a unique and unforgettable experience for me.

I have read and heard a lot about the Holy Father. During a Council Meeting of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) at Czestochowa in the vicinity of the famous Shrine of the

“Black Madona” in Poland. I have learned that the Pope John Paul II has special devotion to Black Madona, also known as The Virgin of Jasna Gora.

On a second trip to Poland to attend also a UCIP council meeting at Krakov I visited Pope’s home town Wadowice near Krakov and saw the house where he was born and spent his childhood. I also visited Krakov where he studied for priesthood and became the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Krakov and then a Cardinal.

I was only one of the millions of men and women who have seen the Pope in their midst. He has the rare distinction of being the most traveled Pope and seen by the largest number of people in any time of human history. He has traveled a total of 1.127,613 k.m. or 3.24 times the distance from the earth to the moon.

Pope John Paul II, at 58 years, was the youngest spiritual head of a billion-plus Catholics for more than a century. He was also the first non-Italian Pope in 455 years at his election on October 16, 1978!

As a journalist and then the editor of a Church family magazine “DOOT” I have keenly watched the Holy Father’s spiritual leadership of the Catholic Church as he perused a path of truth and justice and proved himself a strong defender of human rights and religious freedom around the world.

Over the years I have written innumerable news reports and also a few articles about Pope John Paul II’s life and messages. As an intellectual and writer the Pope prepared his speeches and messages very well for various occasions that he had always something meaningful and thought-provoking for me to write about or to report.

The Holy Father never disappointed a journalist. His actions as well as messages often made headlines in newspapers, radio and television channels around the world. For instance, it was front page news when Pope John Paul II met in 1983 with Mehmet Ali Agca who had attempted to kill him in 1981 with a gun. The Pope forgave the man who attempted to kill him by embracing him in peace and love.

As I was a council member of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) for more than two decades, I traveled many times to Italy and other countries in Europe and I had several opportunities to meet the Pope in Rome and in India during his two visits to this country in 1986 and in 1999. But my personal meeting with him was so overwhelming that I never felt the need to meet him a second time even when the UCIP Council members had a special audience with him in Rome during UCIP’s diamond jubilee celebrations in 2002.

The Holy Father has been an inspiration for me in many things but specially in his courage to proclaim what he sincerely believed is the truth like the sacredness of life in any of its forms from conception to death. He showed uncompromising courage recently in trying his best to prevent and then in condemning the USA-led war on Iraq.

But in my mind three initiatives of Pope John Paul II stand out as sources of great inspiration not only for me but the whole world. As a world leader he called for first time the inter-religious

peace prayer meeting of all heads of major religions in 1986. The Pope was keen to foster unity and inter-religious harmony through the peace prayer meeting held at Assisi, the home-town of St Francis in Italy.

The second inspirational event is The Holy Father praying at the Wailing Wall at Jerusalem and asking the Jewish people for forgiveness for all wrongs which the Christians have committed over the centuries against the Jewish people. The Pope also visited the synagogue in Rome as a sign of reconciliation.

And the third great moment of inspiration for me is the Holy Father visiting the Chief Mosque in Syria and praying there. It is an unmistakable sign of fostering inter-religious unity, harmony and forgiveness between the Christians and Muslims.

The Indian people have many things to cherish about the two visits of Pope John Paul II to India. He celebrated the feast of Diwali in India in 1999. I will never forget the scene of the Holy Father on his knees at the tomb of Gandhiji at Rajghat. As an admirer of Gandhiji he was lost in prayer and meditation that his secretary had to remind him to go for his next appointment.

Pope John Paul II is indeed a great Pope of history that he won the hearts of millions of people across the globe both during his life time and much more at his death on April 3, 2005. The news coverage he got at his death is unprecedented in history to say the least.