

Millions Celebrate The Pope in the New World

by Claudio Celani

The large crowds that gathered to listen to Pope John Paul II during his latest visit to Canada, Guatemala and Mexico, showed that the popularity of the Pope, unsurpassed in the recent history of the Catholic Church, is unabated despite his physical frailty. His support, especially among the youth, has rather increased after the Pope challenged President George Bush's "perpetual war" policy and the legitimacy to react against terrorism with terroristic means, as the Sharon regime is doing against the Palestinians.

This time again, in front of up to 800,000 people in Toronto (mostly youth from all over the world), the Pope twice mentioned the crucial question posed after the Sept. 11 attacks. "Last year," he said in his first address on July 25, "we saw with dramatic clarity the tragic face of human malice. We saw what happens when hatred, sin, and death take command." But, he added, "with your gaze set firmly on [Christ], you will discover the path of forgiveness and reconciliation in a world often laid waste by violence and terror."

The next day, the Pope was even more explicit. He recalled "the terrible terrorist attack on New York, an image that is a sort of icon of a world in which hostility and hatred seem to prevail," and posed the question: "On what foundations must we build the new historical era that is emerging from the great transformations of the Twentieth Century? Is it enough to rely on the technological revolution now taking place, which seems to respond only to criteria of productivity and efficiency, without reference to the individual's spiritual dimension or to any universally shared ethical values? Is it right to be content with provisional answers to the ultimate questions, and to abandon life to the impulses of instinct, to short-lived sensations or passing fads?"

Finally, flying over the United States on his way from Toronto to Guatemala on July 29, the Pope sent an unmistakable message to President Bush: "The United States government must guarantee real justice, peace and well-being to the world. I pray to the Lord to keep abundantly blessing America so that it can draw strength and courage from its spiritual heritage."

The 'Right to Happiness'

Otherwise, within the constraints of a choreographic setting which often looked more like a musical than a liturgical celebration (the responsibility, we believe, of the Vatican "propaganda" department), the 83-year-old Pope enthused the hundreds of thousands of youth by recognizing their "right

to happiness,” and by inciting them to fight to improve the world so that each man can live according to his dignity, as a creature made in the image of God. “You are young, and the Pope is old—82 or 83 years of life is not the same as 22 or 23,” John Paul told them. “But the Pope still fully identifies with your hopes and aspirations. Although I have lived through much darkness, under harsh totalitarian regimes, I have seen enough evidence to be unshakably convinced that no difficulty, no fear is so great that it can completely suffocate the hope that springs eternal in the hearts of the young. . . . Do not let that hope die! Stake your lives on it! We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father’s love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son. . . . People are made for happiness. Rightly, then, you thirst for happiness.”

The Pope also took the occasion of his proximity to the United States, to address the issue which has dominated American media, the so-called pedophilia scandal. “The harm done by some priests and religious to the young and vulnerable, fills us all with a deep sense of sadness and shame,” John Paul said. “But think of the vast majority of dedicated and generous priests and religious whose only wish is to serve and do good.” Thus with unsuspected strength, he gave an example to all those Church leaders who have to face a media attack, just when the Church is an opposition force to the “perpetual war,” or Clash of Civilizations policy.

In his trips to Guatemala (July 29-31) and Mexico City (July 31-Aug. 2), the Pope presided over ceremonies of canonization and beatification with large popular participation. The issue of indigenous populations was at the center of these two trips. The Pope made clear that Indians have the same rights as all other men, created in the image of God, and that they must be respected as a minority and given equal chances to develop. On the other side, he also made clear that Indians can live up to their God-given dignity only if they live in the image of God, as taught by Christ and the Fathers of the Church. The figures of St. Pedro de San José de Betancurt and Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, canonized by Pope John Paul in Guatemala and Mexico, respectively, and of Juan Bautista and Jacinto de los Angeles, who were beatified in Mexico, are all examples of “heroism in Christian virtues” in and among indigenous populations.

St. Pedro de San José de Betancurt was not an Indian, but decided to become a Franciscan Tertiary and became the apostle to African-American slaves, the Indians subjected to inhuman labor, the emigrants, and abandoned children. He founded a hospital, a school, and a church. He is known as the “St. Francis of the Americas.” Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin is the first indigenous saint, who is said to have received an “exterior grace” (the vision of “Our Lady of Guadalupe” with native features and dress).

Dialogue, Not Class Struggle

“Christ’s message,” said the Pope in his homily in Mexico City on July 31, “through his Mother, took up the central



Pope John Paul II on arrival in Mexico, with Mexican President Vicente Fox (left).

elements of the indigenous culture, purified them and gave them the definitive sense of salvation.” In the same homily, given in the presence of President Vicente Fox, the Pope stressed that there must be a dialogue among all components of Mexican society. “The noble task of building a better Mexico, with greater justice and solidarity, demands the cooperation of all. In particular, it is necessary today to support the indigenous peoples in their legitimate aspirations, respecting and defending the authentic value of each ethnic group. Mexico needs its indigenous peoples and these peoples need Mexico.”

These messages must be seen in the context of the Pope’s successful fight against the “liberation theology” movement, in particular the notorious actions of Mexican Bishop Samuel Ruíz, who directly collaborated in the growth of the power of the Zapatista (EZLN) terrorists. The Pope firmly condemns the idea of a class struggle or insurgency, but at the same time warns the institutions of Mexican society not to neglect the legitimate aspirations to progress—and happiness—of the indigenous population. “May all people, civic leaders and ordinary citizens, always act in accordance with the demands of justice and with respect for the dignity of each person, so that in this way peace may be reinforced.”

John Paul called on the indigenous, in turn, to follow the example of the two men he beatified, Juan Battista and Jacinto de Los Angeles, who each preferred to die rather than abjure their Christian faith. “Exemplary in carrying out their public duties [they were attorneys of the Zapoteca tribe], they are a model for everyone, in the little villages or in the large social structures, whose duty it is to promote the common good with great care and selflessness.”

The Pope came back to Rome already announcing his next trip, to Poland on Aug. 16. Recently he said that “God gives him the strength to carry out his task,” and those who saw him in Toronto, where he was in excellent physical condition, were once again surprised at this truth.