

Monsignor Slawomir Oder

Reflection, October 11, 2017

Holy Hour of the St. John Paul II Society at the Church of St. Vincent Ferrer, New York, NY

I would like to invite you, this evening, to imagine staying in Masuria, a very nice area of northern Poland, full of splendid lakes and thick forests, at the end of a hot sunny day, after a long journey kayaking across the beautiful landscapes. Maybe we are tired but, I'm sure, we are happy. We can imagine surrounding a glowing, crackling bonfire and listening to the mosquitos buzzing all around, typical sounds of a Masurian evening.

We can imagine, as well, one of the kayaks turned upside down nearby. Tomorrow, a white cloth will be spread over it, making it a makeshift altar for Mass.

Staying together, praying together, reading the Bible, reflecting together while sharing our thoughts and dreams ... hearing the friendly voice of the group leader who conducts our reflection and makes us dream ...

Imagining all this ... we find ourselves at the typical conclusion of a summer's day of the so-called group of "Srodowisko" – or in English, "Environment".

In 1949, a group of youth, inspired by the young vicar of St. Florian Church in Cracow, a priest named Karol Wojtyla, created a pastoral group that actively participated in the life of the parish. This group was also called: "Family", the "Pack", and "Uncle's company".

After his studies in Rome and after a short period spent in a very small parish of Niegowic, near Cracow, father Karol was appointed as an assistant at Florian church. He was in charge of students and the apostolate for Catholic medical personnel. A short time later, he became the moral, intellectual and spiritual authority for the students.

Mr. Rybicki, who has known the "family" since the beginning, remembers that a very particular atmosphere was present in the relationship between the students and the young priest. Karol made time for all of them, each and every one. Even when he was very busy with his academic studies in higher education, he would never say, "I have no time for you." He welcomed everybody and at any time. Karol inspired the youth, not only by his words but even more by the way he led his life.

He was an example of a man of prayer for them. They would see him, in his kayak, with a breviary and rosary in his hands. They admired his capacity to have a very natural and cordial relationship with boys and girls of the group, which he guided on the path of faith.

This young priest was also an example of charity and poverty. I would like to share one, very heart-warming anecdote. One rainy evening Saint Florian church in Cracow was filled with people who were waiting for Mass to begin, which Father Karol would celebrate. He was well known to be very punctual. But that evening he was nowhere to be seen. After a few minutes of waiting, the sacristan went and knocked on the priest's room. When the door opened, he found Father Karol standing inside looking rather embarrassed. He was not able to go down to the church because he had no boots to

wear and was one sweater shy. He had given them a few minutes earlier to a student who had come to pay him a visit, wearing no shoes and had come down with a cold.

By 1952, the youth would begin to call Karol Wojtyła “Uncle”.

The circumstance in which he got this nickname is funny, actually. Mrs. Rybicka, one of the youth of the “family”, shared this story with me: One day in the spring, when the crocuses were in full bloom, the group decided to go from Cracow to Zakopane, a picturesque village by Tatra mountain, to see this beautiful event. They had to travel on the night train. They were supposed to meet at the station, but when the train was nearing departure, only Father Karol and a group of girls had arrived. At the last minute, one guy showed up saying the boys were not able to come because of an unexpected exam at the university. So it was just Father Karol alone with the girls. In those days, it was unimaginable for a young priest to travel with young girls. And what is more, he wasn’t wearing his collar, because back then, in order to avoid the attention of the secret police, a group of young people had to travel incognito.

The situation was very embarrassing because on the train, in front of other people, the girls were not able to call Father Karol “Father”. So it was decided to call him “uncle”. This name remained with him for the rest of his life. Even after becoming pope he used to sign his letters to the members of the “family” as “Uncle”.

The “family” was truly his family. He was too young to fully enjoy the presence of his mother who had passed away when he was only 9 years old. His brother, a medical doctor, passed away when Karol was 12 and then his father nine years later. The years of Karol’s youth were clouded by World War II. Now, finally, he had his family!

The excursions with Wojtyła were not merely for recreation, but also had spiritual and formational dimensions for those who participated. His aim was to shape the community of young people on Christian basis with the Eucharist as the foundation. There was a principle of mutual respect and friendship. The conversations and discussions with Father Karol, who presented them with the perspective of a mature faith, were an inseparable part of their meetings.

In the preface to one of his best-known dramatic works, *Brother of our God*, a work dated 1945, Wojtyła writes, “It is just of the man not being understood from a human perspective. The metaphysical element is instilled in him, rather found at the origin of his humanity. It is not possible to deeply understand man without considering these origins.”

He was in search of the deepest truth about man and the meaning of the world he lived in. He knew that the origins of man also indicate his ultimate destination: communion with God, sainthood! The work with the “Family” group was deeply oriented to help the members reach this destination!

This goal seems to have been achieved. The group produced its fruits! They are not only good families and group of friends: John Paul II is saint and when Jerzy Ciesielski, a member of the group and professor of the University of Cracow and Khartoum, passed away in 1970, they began considering him a saint. Today the process of his beatification is nearing completion.

Uncle said this about Jerzy:

“He loved life, which he truly lived according to his values, and at the same time he understood these values as a constant task set before him by God. He tried to fulfil this task as thoroughly as possible and to live life as best as possible. He once described his path of life as having “a supernatural orientation”. In this orientation, he found the basis for the fundamental affirmation of what constituted his life's vocation”.

The “family” was the environment in which Father Karol, led his friends, by example, with his words, with his friendship, to holiness. He helped them to find “a supernatural orientation” of their life. Friendship, like true love, is destined to remain forever.

There are many ways to achieve sainthood, which has many faces and many names. I think that our reflection today can help us to understand that holiness does not cut us out of our lives, nor does it separate us from our friends, or prohibits us from having dreams.

In one of his most famous plays, *The Jeweler's Shop*, Wojtyła writes, “Love is not an adventure. It comes from the human being. It has its specific weight. It is the weight of man's entire destiny. It cannot last only for a moment. The eternity of the human being passes through Love. That is why it can be found in the dimension of God. Only God is Eternity.”

The entire life of John Paul II was an ardent effort to help man discover the truth of his real identity in Christ and his vocation. For him, this truth was the foundation for his joy, the strength of his ministry, the hope in the most painful moments of his life and the courage in the most daring and surprising decisions.

I would like to invite you to keep your life and your surroundings, your friendship and families, open to the presence of God. He doesn't want to take anything from you. He doesn't want to deprive us of freedom or of joy. He wants to fill our lives with his scent and give the eternal dimension to what, if based on our capacities alone, is only fragile and fleeting.