

Blessed John Paul II and the National Shrine

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The history of the Basilica of the National Shrine and the life of Pope John Paul II are a mix of blessed coincidences and historical intertwining. Karol Wojtyla was born in Wadowice, Poland, May 18, 1920, two days after Archbishop Giovanni Bonzano, the Apostolic Delegate to the United States (1912-1922), blessed the land upon which this national church of pilgrimage now stands and which Karol Wojtyla would visit several times in his life, a reality seemingly unimaginable to a young boy growing up in Poland during the turbulent years 1920-1945.

As the Archbishop of Krakow, Cardinal Wojtyla first visited the National Shrine in 1969 and then again in 1976 after attending the International Eucharistic Congress, which was held in Philadelphia. At the invitation of Cardinal William Baum, then Archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Wojtyla celebrated Mass in Polish in the Great Upper Church on August 9. The church was filled to capacity with Polish-Americans from the metropolitan area. At the end of Mass Cardinal Wojtyla, along with the concelebrants

and dignitaries, walked in procession to the Polish chapel accompanied by the singing of traditional Marian hymns in honor of the “Black Madonna” of

Czestochowa. The vestments worn by Cardinal Wojtyla on this day are among the historical treasures of the Basilica of the National Shrine.

Twelve days after his election (October 16, 1978), Pope John Paul II spoke privately with Cardinal Baum, a participant in the recent conclave, and Msgr. John J. Murphy, then the director of the National Shrine. Recalling his visits to the National Shrine and the joy and enthusiasm he experienced, the Holy Father asked that those who visit this national church of pilgrimage would pray that his pontificate would reflect the vision of Christ for the world.

In less than one year after his election, Pope John Paul II returned to America's Church on his first pastoral trip to the United States (October 1-7). This visit of a reigning pontiff was an historical first for the National Shrine and the city of Washington, D.C. For the United States, however, it was second to that of Pope Paul VI in 1965 to New York and the United Nations.

Early Sunday morning, October 7, the papal motorcade approached the National Shrine from Fourth Street, NE. A peal of bells from the Knights Tower greeted this friend of the National Shrine. Amid shouts of “Long live the Pope” and “John Paul II, we love you” from the thousands in front of the main entrance, Cardinal Baum and Msgr. Murphy welcomed the Holy Father. Pausing at the main entrance, Pope John Paul II addressed the faithful, reminding them to “make Jesus always a part of your hunger for truth and justice ... and your dedication to the well-being of your fellow human beings.”

The 264th successor to Saint Peter entered the National Shrine to the strains of *Tu es Petrus* (You are Peter) composed for the occasion by the Shrine music director, Robert Shafer, and the applause of 7000 women religious, representing the communities of vowed religious women serving the Church in the United States. After offering a quiet prayer in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, the Holy Father then went to his place

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in the chancel for the celebration of Morning Prayer. Parts of this historic visit are preserved on film; during the singing of the hymn, *All People that on Earth do Dwell*, the baritone voice of the Holy

Father can be heard holding forth the bass line—and quite nicely.

Before leaving the Great Upper Church, John Paul II visited the “Black Madonna” in the Chapel of Our Lady of Czestochowa one last time. Today, an incised marble tablet recalls this moment of prayer.

The Crypt Church and Memorial Hall hosted more well-wishers for the Pope. As the Holy Father prepared to leave, he blessed



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religious mementos and signed the guest book of the National Shrine. In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI autographed the reverse side of the same page signed by John Paul II in 1979. This page is displayed in Memorial Hall along with other papal memorabilia.



Among the gifts Pope John Paul II gave to the National Shrine on this day is a chalice and paten, which is used throughout the liturgical year but

particularly on days and solemnities associated with Pope John Paul II and his pontificate, such as the day of his death (April 2, 2005) and the day of his beatification.

Standing on the steps of the main entrance, the two-hour visit concluded, the Holy Father saluted the faithful gathered under the blue and white banner ornamented with his motto: *Totus tuus* (totally yours); a motto that



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proclaimed not only a life devoted to the Blessed Mother but also the beginning of a pontificate that would be offered in service to the universal church.

The person and pontificate of Pope John Paul II had a lasting and ennobling effect on the church universal and this church in particular. In addition to his visit in 1979, Pope John Paul II elevated the National Shrine to the rank of a minor basilica on October 12, 1990. In addition to the title, the dignity of this rank is exemplified by the *ombrellino* (little umbrella) and the *tintinnabula* (bells), which are displayed at the entrance of the upper sacristy, and the privilege of a *plenary indulgence* (remission of temporal punishment due to sin) to those who participate in the celebration of Mass at the Shrine and pray for the intentions of the Holy Father on the following designated days: November 20, the anniversary of the dedication of this church; December 8, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the patronal feast day; June 29, the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul; and October 12, the anniversary of the elevation of this church to the rank of basilica. Further, the Basilica of the National Shrine was honored to be the location of the National Holy Year Door, which was opened on Christmas Day 1999 at the noon Mass in the narthex of the Great Upper Church. This was broadcast live to Rome via satellite in conjunction with the opening of the Jubilee Year Door at the Basilica of Saint John Lateran in Rome by Pope John Paul II. The Holy Year Door at the Basilica of Saint Peter was opened a few minutes before midnight on December 24, 1999. In the narthex of the Great Upper Church, the papal crest of John Paul II remains above the doors and the brass crosses ornament the doors.

Pope John Paul II was beatified May 1, 2011, by Pope Benedict XVI. The liturgical celebration of Blessed John Paul II was inserted into the calendars of the Diocese of Rome and all the Dioceses of Poland as a “memorial” to be observed on 22 October, the anniversary of the liturgical inauguration of his papacy in 1978. This “local only” versus “universal” inclusion in the liturgical calendar is one of the differences between beatification and canonization. The memorial of Blessed John Paul II may be observed outside of Rome and Poland but with the permission of the Vatican. The Archdiocese of Washington has received permission of the Vatican to include the memorial of Blessed John Paul II in its liturgical calendar.✽