

**Krzysztof Ołdakowski SJ**

# **The Pope – Pilgrim on the Ways of the World**

I have had the great joy of accompanying Pope John Paul II in his pilgrimage for 13 years when I started my job at the Polish Radio. The establishment of the Catholic Programmes Board in the public media was the opening of the way to present information about the activities of the Holy Father and the Apostolic See. Certainly all the pilgrimages of the Pope, the Pole, to his homeland at the time of real socialism were broadcasted by the national media. The bulk of information during particular visits varied, as well as the methods of presentation of his meetings with believers and informing about their course, yet definitely many people did their best to ensure dignity to the broadcasts of the Pope's visits. The national media, where we started work in late July 1989, did not actually present any information on foreign pilgrimages of the Pope. The first visit serviced by the Catholic Programmes Board was very short, as it was merely a two-day visit to the country of our southern neighbours. John Paul II stayed in Czechoslovakia between April 21 and 22, 1990. It was the 46th foreign pilgrimage in the present pontificate. Since then, the Polish Radio and Polish Television have been accompanying John Paul II on pilgrimage routes throughout the world. Including the last visit to Poland in August, these were 52 apostolic visits of the Holy Father. I must admit that in the course of time, we experience the inevitability of time passing, and we care increasingly more to preserve and record all the emotions provided by the Pope's pilgrimages. This has made the recent pilgrimages so vivid to me. Especially the ones held by the Pope on the occasion of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000. These are the pilgrimages I would especially like to write about.

I believe that every journalist working on an event with the participation of the Pope cares mainly to allow the recipients to experience the close encounter with him and his message. This is especially true for journalist-commentator in the radio or TV broadcasts. His work mainly consists in translating texts from foreign languages, in explaining the words and gestures in the liturgy, in reflecting the atmosphere of the event and placing it in a broader cultural and social context. Journalist-commentators must obtain accreditation, come timely to the place of the event, pass all the checks at the pyrotechnical gates, learn about the operation of the commentator

box, find out as much as possible about the course of the event, and acquire the texts of speeches to be delivered by politicians and church authorities. It happens increasingly often that we are not present at the place of the event at all, but we comment on it from the press centre or the radio or TV station. We often comment on the event with the participation of the Pope without actually having any direct contact with him. We have worked on many pilgrimages without directly seeing the Holy Father even once. Personal experience during the pilgrimage becomes less important, although sometimes it takes over and makes us speechless. This happened during the broadcast of an evening prayer during the World Youth Day in Częstochowa, when an heroic girl from Africa rushed towards the Pope up the stairs separating her from the throne, which surprised the security. She was stopped at the last moment. There was an immense silence on the square; everyone waited for the Pope to react, and he made a delicate movement with his hand, showing the African to come forth. With tears in her eyes, the girl rushed into the Pope's arms. I did not know what to say; I was so moved and was absolutely speechless. A similar thing happened to me during the Pope's Meeting with European Youth in Loreto in September 1995. The war was taking place on the other side of the Adriatic Sea. We had a transmission from Sarajevo, where a TV studio was improvised in a bunker, where young people talked to the Pope about their war drama. When they sang: "Lord, look at Sarajevo", everyone together with the Pope cried, and I also could not say a word for a few minutes. These seemed to be the two strongest emotions which made me speechless, although usually we managed to broadcast without major problems, unless the technology failed. Then we had to use the phone.

The most important aspect of every pilgrimage of the Pope is prayer. During every pilgrimage the Holy Father prays both individually and together with the others. This was especially visible during the Jubilee pilgrimage to the Holy Land, which was a religious journey along the history of salvation: from the Nebo Mount through Jesus' birthday place in Bethlehem to Jerusalem – the place of His suffering, death and resurrection. For me, the greatest experience were the moments of Holy Father's individual prayer at the Cave of the Birth, at the Basilica of the Lord's Tomb and of the prayer at the Wawel Cathedral during the last Pilgrimage to Poland, in August 2002. It does not often happen that the image alone spoke on TV and with such an intensity. The Pope, blinded with spotlights, exposed to microphones and camera lenses, seems to be in another world. Contemplation is a way of living for him, which cannot be infringed from the outside. I acted as commentator during the above broadcasts and I must admit that I felt some pressure to break the silence and say something at last. I felt that the behaviour of the Pope was not compatible with television standards, where something has to happen all the time in order not to discourage the viewers. It turns out that silence may say a lot and deny all the usual TV rules.

The Pope's prayer joins people of various religions and denominations. The double pilgrimage of the Holy Father to Assisi in the intention of peace shows that the Pope has the great gift to join people in prayer forming a trustful look in one

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direction. Without blurring the differences, and with respect for everyone's identity, John Paul II can meet other people on the grounds of religious experience. Let us remind the presence of the Holy Father at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and in the mosque of the Umayyad in Damascus. In those symbolic places for Muslim and Jewish believers, the Pope managed to respect each of the religions, discovering what is honourable and true in them, and remaining himself at the same time. During all these years of his pontificate, I have noticed that the homilies of the Holy Father have become increasingly personal. The Pope speaks in view of his own experience. It is as if the pilgrimage became a method for reading the secret of life. In his very personal Letter about Pilgrimages to places related to the History of Salvation, the Pope writes: "Passing in the spirit of prayer from one place or town to another, across the space specially marked with God's action, not only helps us to live our life as a journey, but reveals to us the plastic image of God who precedes us and walks before us, who himself undertook the journey along the ways of man and does not look at us from above, but has become our travelling companion." During the Pilgrimage to the Holy Land we have been led to the very heart of the Gospel. We followed the Pope along the traces of Lord Jesus, who is with us always, as the Pope said spontaneously to children taking their first communion in Amman: "Jesus is your best friend". In Bethlehem John Paul II said: "The joy announced by the Angel is not a thing of the past. It is a joy of today, today of the eternal salvation of the Lord which covers all times: the past, the present and the future. In this place there is always the Birth of the Lord, each day is the Lord's Birth in a Christian heart. Each day we are called to proclaim the message from Bethlehem to the world."

I think that often with his words and personal testimony, the Pope launches a particular mechanism of thinking about the future. This is how I understand the visit of the Holy Father at the University Campus in Kraków, where the site of work camp from the times of World War II is replaced with the network of modern science centres. The newly built library of the Pontifical Academy of Theology is a sign that the Church wishes to participate in the general education of future generations. The Pope's pilgrimage to the Holy Land was an opportunity for the conflicting parties to enter the way of peace. During the memorable meeting at the Notre Dame Institute it was clear that the representative of the Jews, Rabbi Meir Lau, spoke to his own people; also the Palestinian Minister of Justice, judge Al-Tamimi, spoke to his own people; yet the Pope actually spoke to both. He reminded then that each monotheist religions is ruled by the principle: "Do to others what you want to be done to you; the authentic religion knows no exclusion, discrimination, hatred and competition, violence and conflict. Religion cannot become a pretext to justify violence, especially when religious identity corresponds with ethnic and national identity. Religion and peace go together." During the Jubilee Pilgrimage it was evident that the Pope walked on the 'mined' area. Still, he was capable of talking to the Jews and Palestinians in such a way that both nations felt important and honoured. The Holy Father was a prophet during this pilgrimage, not only through solving current problems, but through showing a future vision of life in this area of the world. It was a clear statement that

only the dialogue and patient negotiations may lead to sustainable peace. It is a pity that we can remember that atmosphere created with such an effort only to be efficiently destroyed by politicians seeking to achieve their goals.

The Pope's pilgrimages reveal to me a certain special image of human life. The Pope never imposes anything external; he rather attempts to show the proposal of the Gospel on the example of his own life. Young people invited to the World Meetings feel that they can trust the Pope, as his recipes for happy and successful life are a testimony to the truth about man and love of God. I clearly remember the meeting in Toronto, when the Pope reminded the young: "Do not wait to become old to enter the way of sanctity. Sanctity is always young, as eternal is the love of God. Pass everyone the beauty of the contact with God, which gives the meaning to your life. By searching for justice and by promoting peace in your brotherly devotion, let no one be better than you are!" The faith at the grounds of all actions makes the Pope undertake impossible tasks and makes him fearless. John Paul II poses the fundamental questions touching the human heart, he wishes to go down to the very centre of the human ego. While addressing the youth gathered at the Eurasian University in Astan when answering the question about the meaning of life and human destiny, he said: "You are the thought of God, you are the beat of God's Heart. It is as if to say that in some aspect you have the infinite value, that God cares about you in your unique individuality." I have never heard a more profound definition about who a man is.

This affirmation of human life is especially meaningful when during each pilgrimage we hear the words: "Do not fear, do not become discouraged, God is with you!" The Pope speaks clearly about the sources of this fear: he points to sin, passing and death. He does not avoid these fundamental human problems, but speaks openly about them, pointing to Jesus Christ as the basic medicine to all human fears. It was so at the memorable Saturday meeting at the window during the last pilgrimage to Poland.

The Holy Father stands before us as a modest and suffering Servant to Jesus Christ; perhaps he speaks to us more with his suffering than when he moved us with his great actor's voice; he is nothing like the image of a victorious and proud monarch of the Vatican state, he addresses everyone with love, he appeals to all good people for harmony, forgiveness and building the unity of the divided Church. At the seat of the Orthodox Archbishop of Athens, Chryostoulos, in reply to a long list of claims and accusations of Catholics, the Holy Father presented a warm speech, full of Christian love, in which he asked God to forgive the sins of the Catholic Church done in the past by 'action and negligence' towards our Orthodox brothers and sisters; this especially referred to crusades with the siege of Constantinople in 1204.

The Pope stresses and restores the identity of Christian tradition and the national identity. In Syria, during his pilgrimage following the routes of St. Paul, he stressed that the Syrian Christians are descendants of those whom the Apostle of the Nations wanted to take with himself to Jerusalem. They are the heirs to the first generation of Christians. They can be proud of their tradition. Myrosław Marynowicz – Vice

Rector of Academy of Theology in Lvov noticed that the “clear and pure Ukrainian language spoken by the Pope was an extraordinary and unexpected event. This depreciated language avoided by many deputies in the Highest Council was spoken freely by a person of an international rank – and thus what human weakness tried to disgrace has been dignified.” John Paul II visits all countries as his beloved countries.

The Pope looks into the future. During his pilgrimage to Ukraine, while addressing the Poles and the Ukrainians he said: “It is time to abandon the painful past! Christians of both nations must go together in the name of the only Christ, towards the only Father, guided by the Holy Spirit, who is the source and the principle of unity.” The past is to be left to the Lord.

The Pope restores hope to people. During his pilgrimage in June 2001 the Ukrainian nation could feel that they have value as themselves, and they are not just a “springboard” in the acquisition of new lands for the Lord, such as “the proud heart of Moscow”. One of Ukrainian journalists said that “no one in history has said within just five days so much about Ukraine as John Paul II”

A lesson of practical ecumenism was given to us during the pilgrimage to Armenia, where the Pope stayed for just a few days at the seat of the Catholicos of all Armenians, Karekin II. The Holy Father himself reminded that Christians cannot stand against Christians, and never again the Church against the Church! We should go together, hand in hand, to make the world of the 21st century and new millennium believe. During the Holy Mass in Echmiadzin, John Paul II said: “The only possible competition between the disciples of Christ is such: who is capable of showing more love!” The pilgrimages of the Pope reveal that ecumenism cannot be a task for specialists, but that it must become a way of life for the Christian of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Pope teaches us passion, trying to plant this desire to learn about others and to take common charity and educational work. The example of the Pope will not change much, however, if Christians do not follow him in this approach towards the religious brothers of other denominations which are our sister-churches.

The pilgrimages of the Pope are a great testimony to building a community around universal values. After the events of September 11, 2001 many people discouraged the Pope from travelling to the heart of Central Asia, to Kazakhstan, a country where the majority of inhabitants are Muslim. The Holy Father, however, considered what happened in New York and Washington as an even greater urge to travel to pray for world peace, and testify together with the Muslims to a different image of Islam. Let us remember the words added at the last moment in his thoughts preceding the prayer *Angelus Domini*: “I address you all, both Christians and believers of other religions with an appeal to work together so as to build a world without violence, a world that loves life and which develops in justice and solidarity. We cannot allow the things that happened to lead to making the divisions greater. Religion can never serve as justification of a conflict.” During his pilgrimage to Poland in August, the Holy Father as if fulfilled this prayer by devoting the world to the Divine Mercy: “In all continents, from the depth of human suffering, there seems to rise the call for

mercy. Wherever there is hatred and the will for revenge, where the war brings pain and death of the innocent, there is a need for mercy which alleviates suffering of minds and hearts, and which brings peace. Wherever there is no respect for human life and dignity, there is a need for the merciful love of God, which reveals the unspeakable value of each human existence. There is a need for mercy so that all injustice in the world is put to an end in the light of the truth.”

When leaving Kazakhstan in autumn 2001, the Holy Father appealed: “Look into the future with trust! I have come to you as a pilgrim of hope, and now I am preparing to go back, yet I am moved and I miss you already. May God bless you and guard you!” These were the words addressed by the Pope to all people and nations he has been visiting for 24 years.

During the meeting at the Catholic University of Lublin on the occasion of the 80th birthday of the Holy Father, the spokesman of the Apostolic See, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, reminded the story about a boy who in January 1980 asked John Paul II in one of Roman parishes: “Holy Father, why are you travelling round the world all the time?” The answer of the Pope was very direct: the Pope is travelling so much because “not all the world is here.” The face of the little boy expressed satisfaction with the answer. It is, however, very unlikely that he understood the consequences of this short reply. “Not all the world is here” means that not all the problems of the world are defined by the same cultural, intellectual and moral parameters as here. Talking about human dignity in Italy in 1980 and talking about it in the same year in Poland had a different existential meaning. Talking about freedom in Paris and Havana is not the same thing. Talking about the relations between truth and freedom in the United States of America and in Burundi has a different preaching significance. “Not all the world is here”. Perhaps also the Pope wished to say: you are here and you can ask me this question, and I can talk to you about God and your destiny. Yet the distance has the danger of your contemporaries becoming abstract, becoming “humanity”, while the Pope should talk to everyone as I am talking to you. If “not all the world is here”, I will do everything to ensure the Pope is close to all the world, that is I will travel to be with everyone.

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