

Thoughts on the pope in the modern world

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Pope John Paul II hits people "like a lightning bolt," said Sister Prudence Allen. Some people, "drawn like a magnet," find their faith and their gifts activated by the encounter. Others pull back. But where this pope is concerned "there's no neutral encounter," commented the Sister of Mercy of Alma.

The pope is uniquely qualified through his personal experiences and his intellectual training in Poland "to understand the problems of people," said Sister Allen, a professor of philosophy at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec.

"Instead of pulling away from the world, Pope John Paul II plunges into the world," explained Sister Allen. For her, the pope's love and intense concern for people comes through frequently in his travels.

—The pope makes it a point to study the culture and customs of those he visits and usually celebrates at least some portion of the Mass in native languages.

—He works hard at gearing his addresses to the needs of the individuals and groups he meets. In addressing youth, he tries "to activate their high ideals and values," Sister Allen said. He realizes young people need to fight against "apathy and the feeling that nothing has value."

—He consistently promotes human rights by focusing on the dignity of individuals and groups.

Sister Allen has been meeting regularly for three years in Canada with a small group of doctors, lawyers, social workers, journalists and philosophers to discuss the writings of Pope John Paul II. The group's goal is "to understand what Pope John Paul is saying and why," Sister Allen said.

The group has read many of the pope's texts, including his encyclical on mercy, his apostolic letter on suffering and his speeches on marriage.

The "pope's love of learning is striking," Sister Allen said. "We've never had a pope so well educated in terms of contemporary philosophy." Well-read in such thinkers as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, who have had a large influence on modern society, the pope tries to show "what's good in these thinkers and where their limits are," she said. His interest is to discover "effective ways of reforming the world."

In his writings, the pope tries to forge new ways of approaching problems, Sister Allen

thinks. Often he does this by looking for a "middle ground" between polarized positions.

The pope takes care to keep up-to-date on what's happening in the world of ideas too. Periodically he invites leading scholars to Castelgandolfo, the papal summer residence, for conferences on current issues in science, philosophy or theology. The pope listens and participates in the discussions.

In Sister Allen's analysis, the pope is making a "breakthrough" in the world of ideas on what it means to be a person. The pope tells people this happens only by integrating "psychological, social and spiritual values," she added.

The pope "pushes people to understand their calling" in terms of a vocation to a particular life: as a lay person, a Religious or a priest, Sister Allen said. He urges people to recognize that "everyone is called to a vocation, to become the person you were baptized to be," the Mercy Sister said.

Studying the papal texts has had some surprising results for members of her discussion group, Sister Allen noted. One member converted to Catholicism, another returned to Catholicism.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)



Looking into the poor man's eyes

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

Luke's Gospel has been called the social Gospel. In a special way it shows Jesus preaching and living a message of justice. There is a particular urgency about the message here.

The prophets of old usually delivered their messages bluntly and directly. Jesus preferred the subtler, but at least equally effective, means of storytelling.

Stories remembered all over the world 2,000 years after the telling are extraordinary. In some mysterious way they speak to the depths of the human heart.

Who doesn't recognize the story of the Good Samaritan, for instance, or of Lazarus, who longed to eat crumbs from the rich man's table?

The Parable of the Good Samaritan came in response to a legal expert's question: "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10).

In response, Jesus offered a

story. It was so designed that it might demonstrate how the one who asked the question could be a neighbor to others. The story was a demonstration — and a challenge.

In the story, three men discover a wounded man along the road. Only one — a Samaritan — stops to help.

After telling the story, Jesus asked who had proved to be a neighbor to the wounded man. And the lawyer had to answer — even if he choked on the reply.

The lawyer couldn't bring himself to say "the Samaritan." But he had to admit that the neighbor in the story was the one who treated the wounded man "with compassion."

Lest the lawyer miss the practical point, Jesus told him plainly: "Then go and do the same."

This was not just a powerful lesson in concern for the unfortunate. In the story, the two men who neglected to help the wounded man out of regard for

their own selfish interests were neglecting a fellow-Jew.

By contrast, the one who came to his aid was a Samaritan. His hatred of Jews had been nourished by centuries of deep-seated prejudice.

What the Samaritan saw in this case was not a Jew who happened to be bleeding; he saw a hurting, helpless human being. That was enough.

And the generosity and personal interest the Samaritan continued to show in the story's sequel are a biting indictment of cold and uninvolved expressions of charity.

What is the real point in the story of Lazarus and the rich man? When you read this story in Chapter 16 of Luke's Gospel, notice how the poor beggar is ignored by the others.

For them, Lazarus was just part of the scenery, an unsightly smudge on the canvas. The easiest thing to do was to look the other way.