

A stunning encounter in St. Peter's Square

By George Tombs
NC News Service

One hot summer day in Rome, my wife Angeline and I discovered Pope John Paul II, the pastor, in a totally unexpected way.

A crowd of pilgrims from many nations was pouring into St. Peter's Square. Some 40,000 people had managed to get tickets for the pope's general audience.

Angeline and I came late. We had arrived only the day before on foot from Amiens in northern France, on a Holy Year pilgrimage. We could not afford to stay long in Rome, but we hoped at least to see the Holy Father before continuing on our pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Somehow the Swiss Guards succeeded in finding two last places in the square. For us, it was strange to be in such a huge crowd. We had spent months alone, walking in pouring rain and blazing sunshine. Now, here we were in a sea of applauding pilgrims.

Spaniards broke into song, Czechs held up banners, Vietnamese grouped together in expectation of seeing the pope. Hands reached out from all directions as soon as the Holy Father arrived. He blessed the crowd. People strained to see him.

We had walked very far to get to Rome. Now, seeing him so near, we wanted to share the story of our pilgrimage with him.

As he passed along the railing, Angeline took his hand and told him what we were doing.

How could he understand how we felt about our pilgrimage?

The pope blessed us and then said simply: "Do you want to come to Mass with me?" A Vatican secretary then stepped forward to take our address in Rome in order to get in touch with us. Imagine our amazement!

Later in the week, Angeline and I were invited to come to the pope's summer residence at Castelgandolfo. Here the pope would celebrate Mass in a chapel.

We entered the courtyard of the residence just after sunrise and chatted with the upstairs visitors. Then we were led upstairs and along corridors until we reached the chapel.

In front of the altar knelt the pope. We had never seen anyone so deep in prayer. He seemed wholly tuned to God; his head was cupped in his hands. Above the altar was a painting of Our Lady of Czestochowa, which he seemed to glance up at several times.

He remained in prayer a long time. The windows of the chapel looked out on a pink dawn above Lake Albano. It was a scene of indescribable beauty. While the pope put on vestments, he continued to pray with two other priests and a cardinal.

They celebrated the Mass in Latin. We joined in the Gloria. It was a moment of true fellowship: "Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth."

We felt that the pope had invited us to this chapel because he wanted us to experience and share together the greatest of Christ's mysteries. This communion of worship meant more to us than anything in the world because it was so simple and full of peace and prayer.

After the concluding rite, we left the chapel silently. The pope remained kneeling before the altar.

Then he came out to speak to each one of us. When he came to Angeline and me, he asked about our pilgrimage and blessed us.

"Thank you for your visit," he said. "Pray for me during your pilgrimage to Jerusalem."

Like a true pastor, he gave us encouragement which would help us during our long walk to the Holy Land.

(Tombs is a writer and radio broadcaster in Montreal, Quebec.)

But Lazarus was not a smudge. He was human. His misery was at least the indirect by-product of their luxury.

After the rich man died, it was too late for him to right the situation. His plea from the dead that his brothers be warned by Lazarus before they made the same mistake met with a chilling reply: "They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them."

The rich man realizes that he never listened to the warnings of the prophets about injustice and that his brothers won't either. So he pleads for someone to return from the dead with a warning that will shock them into their senses.

The final answer to this frantic plea is devastating. "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if one should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

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FOOD...

...for thought

Speaking in what he called the "language of the heart," Pope John Paul II brought a "message of compassion and hope" to refugees at Phanat Nikhom. This is a camp in Thailand for 17,000 Indochinese refugees.

"We are truly brothers and sisters, members of the same human family, sons and daughters of the same loving Father," the pope told them.

He added, "I wish to share with you your sufferings, your hardships, your pain, so that you may know that someone cares for you, sympathizes with your plight and wants to help you find relief, comfort and a reason for hope."

The pope had some suggestions for the refugees. He urged them to

—remember their identity as free people who have a rightful place in this world and to remain firmly rooted in their respective cultures;

—take whatever opportunities arise to learn a new language and perfect a skill to adapt to new social situations.

The pilgrim pope pledged to help the refugees. And later, in a speech to top officials of the Thai government he spoke of the refugees' situation.

Visiting the camp, he told the government officials, "was a particularly moving experience for

me because, as I looked into the faces of so many suffering human beings, at the same time I realized that there were thousands more in a similar situation."

To keep silent on their plight, the pope continued, "would be a kind of denial of what the Catholic Church teaches about human dignity and about how individuals and nations can and should respond in defense of that dignity."

He pointed out that each refugee "is an individual human being, with his or her own dignity and personal history." The refugees' anguish is worsened, he said, because they have been "uprooted from their homes...and have left behind the tombs of their ancestors. In a very real way they have left behind a part of themselves."

The pope defended the rights of the refugees. He noted that resettlement alone is never a "final answer." Refugees "have a right to go back to their roots, to return to their native land," he said.

In the long run, the pope added, the refugees' difficulties can't be solved "unless the conditions are created" for genuine reconciliation and forgiveness across the world, between nations and between differing groups within nations.

...for discussion

1. Is there a message for you in what Pope John Paul II says when he visits Catholics in nations all around the world?

2. George Tombs describes an encounter with the pope which led to a surprising invitation. Do you think this encounter reveals anything about the kind of person the pope is?

3. The pope speaks frequently about human dignity and human rights. What are some of the ways in which human dignity and human rights are violated in today's world?

4. The pope has taken a special interest in the world's poor people. He speaks often of making an option for the poor. Why do you think he is so concerned about the poor? What are some of the forms poverty takes in society?

SECOND HELPINGS

"The Dialogue Between Faith and Culture," Pope John Paul II's address to representatives of culture and the arts at Sogang University in Seoul, South Korea, in May 1984. This speech appeared in the issue of *Origins* dated May 24, 1984. Observing that he has long been interested in the dialogue between the church and world culture, the pope said that the arts, science and technology are ways which "open up new avenues toward truth and deepen for us the understanding of God's mysteries." This issue of *Origins* also has the pope's address to Thai government officials about the plight of Indochinese refugees. (*Origins*, 1312 Mass. Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005. Single copy, \$3; multiple copy rates on request.)