



“St. John Paul II”

This column first appeared in the
13 July 2014 Diocesan Chronicle

Jason Evert’s fine new biography, *Saint John Paul the Great—His Five Loves* makes clear why this pope made such a mark on our time and such a claim on our hearts.

In his 27 years as pope, St. John Paul II traveled 775,000 miles—more than three times the distance to the moon. Half a billion people saw him in person, and many of them felt an immediate connection. Each morning thirty or forty new letters from around the world were set out for him in his chapel before Mass. He read every one and prayed for the intentions requested.

The Pope was especially drawn to the sick, and they to him. A papal photographer remembered a visit to a home for lepers: “Many of us couldn’t even look at some of these diseased people . . . without faces. He touched them, stroked them, kissed and blessed them, helped them to eat.”

John Paul II came near to people because his life experience had not distanced him from them. “I was a laborer for four years,” he said, “and for me those four years of work are worth more than two doctorate

degrees!” His labors taught him to live simply. As bishop he wore a pair of shoes until the soles fell off, and his hole-tattered undershirts looked like work rags.

In the early ‘60s a Polish communist leader boasted that he had personally blocked six or seven candidates whom Cardinal Wyszynski proposed to be the new archbishop of Krakow. This official was waiting to approve the name of the man he was sure the communists could control: Bishop Karol Wojtyla.

Quickly realizing the gravity of their mistake, the communists subjected the future pope to uninterrupted surveillance. They tapped his phone, read his letters, recorded his homilies, noted his trips to the dentist, and even paid attention to who purchased his underwear.

They had much to keep up with, because Cardinal Wojtyla worked from sixteen to twenty hours a day. Gifted with “split concentration,” he absorbed information from two sources simultaneously. He could read and converse at the same time.

It pleased him to talk about the Mother of God. “I was already convinced that *Mary leads us to Christ*,” he wrote, “but . . . I began to realize also that *Christ leads us to his mother*,” that “he points her out to anyone who strives to know and love him.”

Kneeling before the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1979, John Paul first grasped that God was calling him as pope to travel

the world preaching the Gospel. For if a state that denied religious freedom as Mexico did, could permit the pope to visit, how could Poland refuse? So he went to Poland and history changed its course.

But John Paul II's course as pope had already been set; his papal ministry really began under the encouraging eyes of the Virgin in Mexico. Twenty-three years later, worn down by weakness, he insisted on returning there to pay her his final homage for helping him take hold of his vocation to the papacy.

"Every vocation changes our plans, disclosing a new one," St. John Paul observed, "and it is astonishing to see how much inner help God gives us." If you and I trust God as Karol Wojtyla did, we may hope to share his astonishment.