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An Environmental Tribute to Karol Wojtyla: Pope John Paul II

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It was impossible for anyone to be in Poland from April second to April eighth of 2005 and not notice or participate in the unforgettable events commemorating the death of Polish icon – Pope John Paul II. Thanks to the Fulbright Fellowship during the 2004-2005 academic year that had me teaching and consulting at two universities, both in Poznan, Poland, I was able to be a part of these events in April. People all over the world paid their final tributes and participated in the last journey of the Bishop of Rome, their father, friend, teacher, and authority. However, the Polish people were especially devastated to lose their national symbol of truth, love and hope. The Polish nation will always remember the Pope as a persistent fighter against the destruction of human rights, freedom and nature. Poles will for many years have vivid memories of John Paul's speeches during his pilgrimages to his homeland when he encouraged people to express their support for the Solidarity movement and freedom.

Yet I will also remember Pope John Paul II for his love of human dignity, freedom, his devotion to the environment, and deep ecological awareness. Those who knew him personally and worked with him while he was still a priest in Poland, will also remember his affection for the environment exemplified through the nature walks, tours, and hikes that he organized. As a survivor of the Second World War, Karol Wojtyla was no stranger to pain, suffering, and loss. These experiences helped him realize the necessity of sheltering life and of man's need for the beauty of nature, and they were a driving factor for his environmental consciousness and outspokenness. These lessons from the past and the Polish political climate drove Karol Wojtyla, as a young priest, to become the spiritual leader of the Krakow students' tourist group called "Srodowisko" (Environment) that he established in 1949. The main goal of the Srodowisko group was to enrich Eucharistic knowledge of Christ and to organize outdoor tours and cultural events in order to enhance the spiritual life of students while introducing them to the joys of nature that could give them intellectual escape and enrichment. Students were attracted to this group because it allowed them to escape from the influence of Stalinist doctrines and to look for alternative views and ways of spending their free time. Wojtyla organized many mountain hikes, walks, skiing trips, kayaking vacations, biking tours, and camping trips. These outdoor trips stimulated students and allowed them to participate in discussions, prayers, meditations, and also to establish meaningful friendships. The group's environmental activities continued after 1964 when Wojtyla became Metropolitan Bishop of Cracow . After becoming a Pope in 1978, Wojtyla

wrote about how much the group helped him learn about family lives and friendships, and solidify his love for the environment (Polak, 2004, vol.30, p.36).

John Paul II enjoyed skiing and he loved mountain hikes. The Polish Tatra Mountains (the highest range of Carpathian Mountains situated between Poland and Slovakia) were always a very special place for him. He strongly believed that people, by putting physical efforts into hiking or skiing, could be restored when the beauty of the mountains surrounded them. John Paul valued the ripe color of green forests, the very ragged shape of mountains, the permanent awareness of direction and weather, the silence and peace associated with mountains. In 1988, the Tatra Mountains provided a safe place without any witnesses for his private meeting with the leader of the Solidarity movement, Lech Walesa (Polak, 2004, vol. 3, p. 8-9).

After becoming the first non-Italian pope since 1523, John Paul II often called for environmental alerts in his speeches, messages, encyclicals, and publications. "Protection of the environment from the point of view of the human person" was the Pope's main concern. In his address to the members of the United Nations in 1985 John Paul stated:

...therefore, that all ecological programmes must respect the full dignity and freedom of whomever might be affected by such programmes. Environment problems should be seen in relation to the needs of actual men and women, their families, their values, their unique social and cultural heritage. For the ultimate purpose of environment programmes is to enhance the quality of human life, *to place creation in the fullest way possible at the service of the human family* (John Paul II, August 1985).

In John Paul II's environmental outspokenness the main objective was to protect the human environment and enhance the individual's dignity. He exemplified this idea in his calls for "a new ecological awareness" during the 1990 World Day of Peace and in 2001 with his call for an ecological conversion to help the environment before weekly audiences. In his admonishments for preservation of the environment and respect for the earth, John Paul II was also a strong protector of the future generations that might not have a chance to experience the same quality of life as we have now.

In paying this environmental tribute to Karol Wojtyla the Pope John Paul II it is worth remembering that in today's local, national, and international projects dealing with environmental issues the needs of humans have to be considered in front of economic and political needs. Additionally, in this era of environmental disasters it is not only the responsibility of Christians to

protect nature as an essential part of their faith. There is "the urgent need for a new solidarity" to bring all nations and religions to work together on protecting the environment and human dignity.

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