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## Opening Address

Rev. Donald J. Harrington, C.M.

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# OPENING ADDRESS

MARCH 23, 2006

REVEREND DONALD J. HARRINGTON, C.M.†

It is a pleasure to welcome you to St. John's University and to this symposium, which seeks to make a small contribution to what I am sure will be a long lasting effort to better understand the legacy of Pope John Paul II.

Permit me to put my very brief remarks into context. On March 30 of last year I flew from Kennedy Airport to Rome to celebrate the tenth anniversary of St. John's Rome campus. As I was checking into the hotel and getting settled in my room, the news was beginning to spread that the Holy Father's health had worsened and that his life was coming closer and closer to its end. So I found myself in Rome in the midst of an extraordinary experience—watching the mood of the city change as the news became more troubling and people became more focused on imminent loss. I also was one of the few American university presidents in Rome and, as a result, I was asked to respond to requests from the news media for my perspective on the events that were unfolding.

In the midst of all the activity, I had time on Saturday afternoon, April 2, to stand in St. Peter's Square, just a few hours before the Holy Father died. The experience was one that I shall never forget. Although there were literally thousands and thousands of people, there was almost complete silence . . . reverence . . . no sound at all . . . everyone looking up at the window, almost as if they were in Church looking up at the crucifix. Then out of the silence, a song would break out—in Italian, or Polish, or some other language, and then it would die down again. And then another song would break out in yet another language.

I stood there for about an hour and found myself not only praying, but also reflecting upon how unprecedented this moment was. It was clear to me that it was not the grandeur of

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† President, St. John's University.

St. Peter's Square that was having an impact on the people who were there, but, rather, it was this amazing man. What kept going through my mind was, "Why? What was it about him? What made the difference?"

Like all of us, I have certain phrases buried in my memory that come to mind at key moments in my life. One of those phrases is a quote from John Paul II's first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*. To slightly paraphrase, he speaks of the Christian redemption story, or the Gospel, as being "amazement at the dignity and worth of the human person." That phrase often resonates in my mind, and it came back to me as I stood in St. Peter's Square. What was most striking to me about this whole experience was amazement at how many people had been affected by the dignity and worth of this *particular* human person. And I think that helps explain what has brought us all to this symposium: we seek to know more about the qualities, the values, the beliefs, the personality, in all of its dimensions, that were combined and embodied in John Paul II and that made him the titanic figure that he was. There he was on his death bed, in human frailty, as every one of us will be someday and so many have been before us. Yet, what was it that drew us there and that has made him so admired, respected, even revered?

We are blessed in many ways because we have many materials which will help us in our quest to seek answers to these questions. John Paul II gifted us with fourteen encyclicals addressing the most important issues, certainly in Christian, and perhaps in human existence—the relationship between faith and reason (*Fides et Ratio*), the conflict between labor and capital and the rights of workers (*Laborem Exercens*), and the Church's moral theology (*Veritas Splendor*). There are so many sources to which we can go if we truly want to penetrate the core of the man and understand why his impact has been so extraordinary.

Quite honestly, in reflecting on John Paul II and in preparing these few words for today, I was struck by images of the State of the Union address. I'm sure we have all seen the dynamics associated with this occasion. The President says something and one side of the chamber stands to applaud while the other remains seated. And then he says something else and the first side sits down and the other one stands up. And then there are those rare times when both sides are up. It is fair to say that this probably reflects people's views of John Paul II. On

one side of the aisle are those who stand and applaud his conservative stance on such matters as Church doctrine, reproduction, and the ordination of women. Then he speaks about capital punishment, debt forgiveness, social justice and peace, and concern about unrestrained capitalism, and they sit down as the other side stands up. And yet every now and then, everyone is up. Such was that moment in St. Peter's Square.

Indeed, we know that some of his statements and positions upset many people in the United States. Not everyone applauded at all times or even at all. The warnings about materialism, selfishness, and secularism didn't sit well. Statements that one cannot apply American democratic procedures to faith and truth, his language of the culture of death, and his steadfastness on issues such as contraception and abortion, did upset people. And in particular I think some people were concerned about his handling of the sex abuse crisis.

On that last subject—the sex abuse crisis—I would like to share a personal anecdote. I returned to the United States before the Pope's funeral for a number of reasons, including some media commitments. On the Sunday after the funeral, I was on Wolf Blitzer with Father David O'Connell, President of the Catholic University, and Father Andrew Greeley. Andrew Greeley made the point that John Paul II's legacy was tainted, that people around the world were deeply troubled because of his handling of the sex abuse crisis, and that the church would have to face this reality. I remember reflecting on that statement and then commenting, "As terrible as the crisis was, I'm not sure that there is consistency between this notion that he engendered such negativity and the obvious outpouring of love and reverence that we experienced in a packed St. Peter's Square at the time of his death."

And perhaps that is the best way to approach his Papacy and his legacy. Perhaps there were problems with that issue, perhaps there were weaknesses in some of his other positions—we are all human. Nonetheless, the fact is that St. Peter's Square was full. And the quest which I think is ours is to understand that more fully. The fact remains that this was a truly great man.

Permit me to share several quotes about Pope John Paul II that struck me and that illustrate, I believe, his profound impact. Rev. Thomas Reese, S.J., former editor of *America*, noted, "He

says what he thinks is right and wrong from conviction, and that's why people admire him. He's a man of integrity and prayer, even if they don't agree with him." The theologian and ethicist George Weigel observed, "John Paul was not simply a man of the century, but a prophet of the new millennium." The noted author Richard John Neuhaus said, "This has been one of the most extraordinary pontificates in 2000 years of church history." And the famed conservative commentator William F. Buckley, Jr. wrote, "The most tireless moral voice of the secular age, he reminded humankind of the worth of the individual in the modern world."

So what do we say? Who was this man? Why did he have such profound influence on our world? The conference papers illustrate the breadth of the Pope's contributions to law, culture, and politics, and we at St. John's hope that these papers and the thoughts that we share during the next two days will help everyone take a few more steps toward understanding his greatness and the legacy that he has left to all of us.

And so very simply, I return to St. Peter's Square. I believe that most people would say that we stand in amazement at the worth and dignity of this particular human person. I thank all of you, especially the presenters, for playing such a special role in our efforts to delve more deeply into his thoughts and enrich our understanding of his greatness.