

A pope who showed us how to love the young

The mutual love affair between Pope John Paul II and young people emerged as a remarkable feature of his pontificate. Papal visits anywhere in the world included a gathering with the local youth who flocked to hear him, sing for him, dance and banter with him. This was rather puzzling to some of the critics of John Paul II. After all, how could a frail, aging, celibate man, supposedly out of touch with the contemporary world, have such a strong youthful following? What was his secret?

Some pointed to his background in theatre, his talent for responding to an audience. But it had to be more than that. Young people would have quickly seen through the façade of a 'pretending' Pope, no matter how good an actor. Others put it down to the clarity of his orthodoxy. Young people want certainty and they are attracted to his clear moral stand, they said. But, while there was truth in this, I don't believe it got to the heart of John Paul II's youthful appeal.

In my view, the late Pope's 'magic' had to do with the fact that he genuinely loved young people. Not 'love' in that general we-are-all-called-to-love-people sense. I mean that he personally enjoyed and reveled in their goodness, their culture, their aspirations and zest for life. They had a special place in his heart –

and they knew it.

Look at any of John Paul's addresses to youth and you will find there a relentless optimism, resisting the laments about youth having rejected traditional values. Rather, he saw them as living out a graced period of life when idealism and the search for meaning take on a particular prominence. John Paul II did not simply tolerate this characteristic of youth, he loved it! And he urged every parent, pastor and mentor of youth to love it too.

In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* he wrote, 'They want love to be beautiful. If they give in to weakness following models of behaviour that can rightly be considered a scandal...in the depths of their hearts they still desire a beautiful and pure love.' Call him a hopeless romantic if you like, but this was a pope who refused to see youth as 'a problem'. With every demanding gospel teaching held out to the young he had an equally strong message about how irresistibly beautiful they are, the greatness of which they are capable, and how the Church values their gifts.

For every parent, teacher, catechist, priest or bishop who has agonised over how to reach young people, John Paul II held out a timeless lesson: Never lose sight of the goodness of youth. Revel in their beauty. Marvel at their God-given gifts. Let them see it in your eyes, your smile, a 'thumbs-up' gesture of approval. Let them absorb it in your quiet gaze of admiration, a firm handshake or warm hug, your

seeking out their opinion. Let them overhear you praising them behind their backs, welcoming their culture, their gifts, insights and questions, and defending them against the mantra of hopelessness about youth abandoning the church.

And, I would add, remember. Especially where families struggle with great hurts associated with the adolescent years, remember him as a curly headed youngster who used to ride on your shoulders. Remember how fiercely you protected her in your womb. Remember, not as a pining for the past, but as a present reminder of the beauty and truth of this child of God, hidden like precious treasure under whatever layers of confusion and pain they struggle with today.

It is something of a paradox that, even as a frail and aging bishop, John Paul II gave the world a magnificent lesson in how to reach the hearts of the young.

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