

I was ordained a priest just a few months after Cardinal Karol Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II. For 26 years I have prayed for this pope by name at every mass I have ever said as a priest. He was inspiring. He gave all his resources to the gospel. He was a brilliant thinker. He energized people whether they saw him one-on-one or in a teeming crowd of millions. He is a leader we have come to love. And now he is gone.

Pope John Paul staunchly defended human life; he coined the expression “the culture of death” to describe the moral depravity of our society and to refocus our attention on the dignity of every human being. The pope opposed abortion, promoted decent end-of-life care, and called for an end to the death penalty. He forgave the man who tried to kill him. He condemned terrorism, and he openly criticized America’s invasion of Iraq. To see him in front of crowds, you’d think he was the most popular man on earth, but people have not always heeded his teachings.

John Paul oversaw many changes in the church. He revised the catechism, the code of canon law, and the prayers we use at mass. He loved spending time with young people, yet he had one of the greatest philosophical minds of our day. On the world stage he is largely responsible for the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, yet in private life he promoted popular devotions like the rosary, stations of the cross, and Divine Mercy Sunday, which we celebrate today, the day of his death.

Karol Wojtyla was an ordinary man who received extraordinary gifts at a critical moment in world history, when science and communications were advancing. As pope, he helped us all welcome the new millennium with our attention fixed not on Y2K, but on Christ, whose birth determines when millenniums fall.

At the end of his life, Pope John Paul became a symbol of suffering. Refusing to retire, he soldiered on with the strength that God gave him, and he showed once again the dignity of every human life, no matter that person’s abilities.

For the next week to 10 days the Church will celebrate the funeral rites for the Holy Father. Shortly after that 117 cardinals will go to Rome to vote for the new pope. If all goes smoothly, and if God is willing, we will be praying for our new pope, by name, at every mass by the end of April.

On this Sunday after Easter we hear the story of how the apostles gathered after Jesus was gone. St. Luke says, they “devoted themselves to teaching, the communal life, the breaking of bread and to prayers.” We do the same in the absence of this great leader. We devote ourselves to teaching others what we have learned, living peacefully in community, and offering prayers, especially through the breaking of the bread, the eucharist. Pope John Paul II is gone from our eyes, but his spirit will live on. Whenever we gather at the eucharist, we are present with him, with all our departed loved ones, and with the One whose body we share in the breaking of the bread, Jesus Christ.