

April 2, 2005

Cardinal Walter Kasper, President
Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity
00120 Vatican City
EUROPE

Dear Cardinal Kasper,

I am deeply saddened by the news of the passing of His Holiness, John Paul II.

It was my privilege to meet with John Paul II on a number of occasions.

His humanity, his warmth, his personal sensitivity, his ecumenical commitment, and his sense of humor are among the many memories that I will not soon forget. In a private audience with him in 1989, he paid special attention to my wife and sons. In that moment he won my heart.

In a 1993 audience, Cardinal Cassidy called me to the head of a long line of Bishops and introduced me. His Holiness held up the line long enough to address me personally. “So you are a Pentecostal,” he began. “Yes, I am,” I responded. Then I thanked him for his support of the Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue. As I relaxed my grip to move on, he grabbed my hand again. “You know,” he advised me, “Pentecost is where the Church first received her power.” “Yes, your Holiness, it certainly is,” I returned. Again I relaxed my grip, but he held my hand tightly and this time he pulled me close to him to make his point. “And it is still the same today!” Then with a twinkle in his eye he smiled warmly and released my hand. “Amen!” I responded. And I moved on. A few minutes later, he laughed and joked with us as we stood with him for photographs.

More than once, he showed his frustration at his inability to control his body when he greeted me. Yet, he was a winsome host at the various meals we shared together. I was humbled by his invitations to process with him, to lead the faithful in reciting the Creed, or to offer prayer on behalf of the world in services over which he presided.

John Paul II pointed us toward the Giver of life – from within a culture of death.

He had the clarity of vision matched by few others in our time. He was a decisive leader in a time of mixed messages and declining moral certainty. He worked his way through the limitations his condition imposed upon his physical body and he rose above them to carry out his vocation with conviction. His life was a powerful reminder that God works even through those that the world would quickly pass by or encourage to die, because they are weak, limited by physical ailments, or simply not whole. Repeatedly, he reminded us that “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever,” and it was in His Name that he carried on with His work.

John Paul II inspired us to hope – from within a culture of despair.

He affirmed the future. He engaged and challenged the young. He led the world to think regal thoughts by empowering his own regal thoughts with his own regal actions. He

called us to embrace Jesus Christ in a personal way, the one who suffered, died, and rose again for our salvation, and to bear witness to God's love before the world. He summoned the Church to a new evangelization that begins within each individual and extends outward to embrace the world. He never lost sight of why he was in the position he was in.

John Paul II called us to peace – from within a culture of violence, terror, and war.

He provided a vivid example of how Christians should live. He was open about his strengths and his weaknesses. He forgave his would be assassin, unilaterally and unconditionally. He reached out to the Jews by visiting the Holocaust center in Jerusalem. He offered his resources to resolve the siege at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity. He provided moral direction to the world's leaders. He showed love, respect, and friendship to Orthodox Christians everywhere. He called Christian leaders, Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Evangelical, Holiness, and Pentecostal, to envision and celebrate the new possibilities offered by a new millennium. He commemorated and celebrated the lives and sacrifices of the martyrs of the 20th Century, regardless of their Christian tradition. Repeatedly he offered his condolences and his prayers to the millions who have suffered loss through natural calamity, war, pestilence, and sickness around the world. Twice he persuaded the world's religious leaders to join him at Assisi in order to pray for the peace of the world.

John Paul II called us to love – from within a culture marked by selfishness.

He reminded us that before we were Christians, we were human beings. He demonstrated that as Christians, our willingness to serve God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength, requires an equal commitment to serve our fellow human beings. He bore a firm and unambiguous witness to the Truth as it is revealed in Jesus Christ, even when it did not measure up to the world's standards of political correctness. He did not fear dialogue, or criticism, or even death. He simply walked with God. And in so doing, he reflected something of the love of the One who calls us to similar acts of faithful service as well.

I have lost a friend. I will miss him!

The last time I was in his presence was for evening vespers at St. Peter's basilica, November 13, 2004 when he led the celebration of the 40th Anniversary of *Unitatis redentigratio*. I felt for him as he struggled to complete his part in the service. But he didn't give up, and as he left the place, he raised his hand in blessing. Please accept my condolences on this sorrowful occasion. I will be in prayer with you and all those who now must seek Almighty God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – for direction in selecting his successor.

In Anticipation of the Resurrection,

Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., Co-chair
International Roman Catholic – Pentecostal Dialogue