

The Final Years

**To The Very End:
Pope John Paul II**

The Final Years

To The Very End: Pope John Paul II

PUBLISHED BY THE LITTLE SISTERS OF THE POOR

© Copyright 2011 – Little Sisters of the Poor
www.littlesistersofthepoor.org

Designed by Melissa Halpern-Smith, Advertising Media Plus
Printed by Cavanaugh Press

Photos: L'Osservatore Romano, used with permission.

∞ Foreword ∞

Word and Witness: Blessed John Paul II's theology of aging

Blessed John Paul II created an enormous corpus of writings during his long pontificate. His works include theological expressions that are now integral to the Church's contemporary lexicon, including the "Gospel of Life," the "theology of the body" and the "spirituality of communion." Although less known than some of his other works, his 1999 *Letter to the Elderly*, together with several speeches to older persons, could be the basis for a "theology of aging" which promises to become increasingly relevant as the population of seniors in our midst grows.

The basics of what could be called John Paul II's "theology of aging" were articulated in a general audience on September 7, 1994. After discussing the decline in health common to aging, he suggested that older persons use their sufferings to unite themselves to Christ's suffering and cross. The Holy Father then proclaimed, "*Old age is also a gift for which we are called to give thanks: a gift for the person on in years, for society and for the Church. Life is always a great gift.*"

The Pope spoke of a special charism given to older persons who may use their strengths and talents for their own joy and the good of others. He also evoked the concept of charisms when speaking to a group of Christian seniors gathered in Rome for an international meeting.¹ "How important it is," he said, "that people of your age offer a completely humane and Christian vision of life, show forth the wisdom of their experience, create the bond between

different generations, bear witness to true affection, to the free gift of oneself, to serenity, to a quiet but radiant joy, to strength in time of trial, to the interior life, to hope in the afterlife, to what could be called ‘the charisms of the evening of life!’”

Blessed John Paul II wrote eloquently about old age and several years after his death it is clear that he embodied a Christian “theology of aging” in his own life, to the very end. In his speeches he encouraged seniors to give themselves generously to others and in his own life he continued to travel and receive visitors even when he was no longer able to speak. Just as he encouraged older persons to unite their sufferings with greater love to the sacrifice of Christ, on his last Good Friday John Paul II clung to the cross with all the strength he could muster as he made the Stations of the Cross. And just as he had encouraged seniors to look toward heaven with hope, he admitted that he found great peace in thinking of when the Lord would call him, “from life to life.”² His last recorded words – “Let me go to the house of the Father”³ – are themselves a striking witness.

With this modest book, it is our goal to honor the memory of Blessed John Paul II and to share his “theology of aging” – taught through both words and witness – with older persons and those who minister to them. It is our ardent desire that these words and images will offer hope. We also pray that it will strengthen the conviction that old age really is a gift for which we are called to give thanks, because life is always a great gift!

– Little Sisters of the Poor

Notes

¹ John Paul II, Message to Vie Montante, October 4, 1982.

² John Paul II, “Letter to the Elderly,” October 1, 1999.

³ Witness of Stanislaw Dziwisz, John Paul II’s longtime personal secretary, in “Let Me Go to the Father’s House.” Pauline Books and Media, 2006. p. 37.

Grant, O Lord of life, that we may savor every season of our lives as a gift filled with promise for the future. Grant that we may lovingly accept your will, and place ourselves each day in your merciful hands.

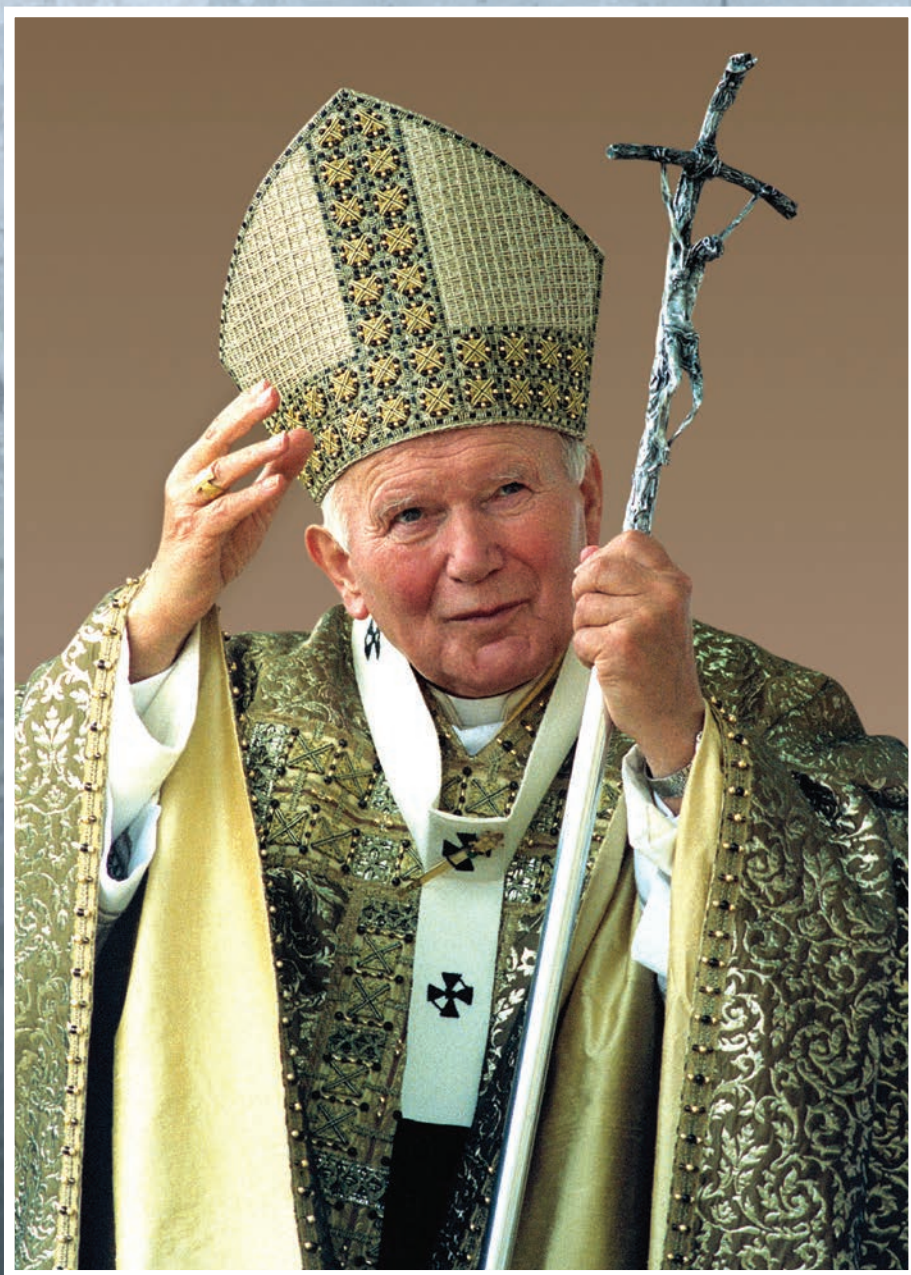
And when the moment of our definitive “passage” comes, grant that we may face it with serenity, without regret for what we shall leave behind. For in meeting you, after having sought you for so long, we shall find once more every authentic good which we have known here on earth, in the company of all who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith and hope.

Mary, Mother of pilgrim humanity, pray for us “now and at the hour of our death.” Keep us ever close to Jesus, your beloved Son and our brother, the Lord of life and glory. Amen!

— *Letter to the Elderly, 1999*

“ I can wish no greater blessing upon you, my elder brothers and sisters, than the peace of Christ. May peace be the atmosphere in which you pass your days and may it be firmly established in your souls. May you be able to share your peace with all those around you.”

– Address to the Elderly in Perth, 1986





“With the resources of your own temperament and of God’s help, stay smiling, benevolent, receptive. This stage of your life should be a time for moral and spiritual ascent, a serene and wonderful fulfillment of your whole existence.”

– *Special Audience following
the Beatification of Jeanne Jugan, 1982*

“Man remains for ever made
“in the image of God” (cf. Gen 1:26),
and each stage of life has its own
beauty and its own tasks.”

– *Letter to the Elderly, 1999*



“The elderly often have the charism to bridge generation gaps before they are made: how many children have found understanding and love in the eyes and words and caresses of the aging? And how many old people have willingly subscribed to the inspired word that “the crown of the aged is their children’s children?” (Prov 17:6)

– *Address to an International Forum on Active Aging in Rome, 1980.*

“Precisely as so-called “senior citizens,” you have a specific contribution to make to the development of a genuine “culture of life” – you have, we have, because I also belong to your age group – witnessing that every moment of our existence is a gift of God, and that every season of human life has special treasures to put at the disposal of all.”

– *Homily for the Jubilee of the Elderly, 2000*





“ You can look back on lives rich in memories ... If you think back, you will see that your whole life is a story of God’s love coming upon you in successive stages. ”

– *Address to the Elderly in Perth, 1986*

“ Old age is the crown of the steps of life.

It gathers in the harvest,
the harvest from what you have
learned and experienced,
the harvest from what you
have done and achieved,
the harvest from what you
have suffered and undergone.

As in the finale of a great
symphony,
all the great themes of life
combine to a mighty harmony.”

— Address to the Elderly in Munich, 1980



“How many people find understanding and comfort from elderly people who may be lonely or ill and yet are able to instill courage by their loving advice, their silent prayers, or their witness of suffering borne with patient acceptance! At the very time when their physical energies and their level of activity are decreasing, these brothers and sisters of ours become all the more precious in the mysterious plan of Providence.”

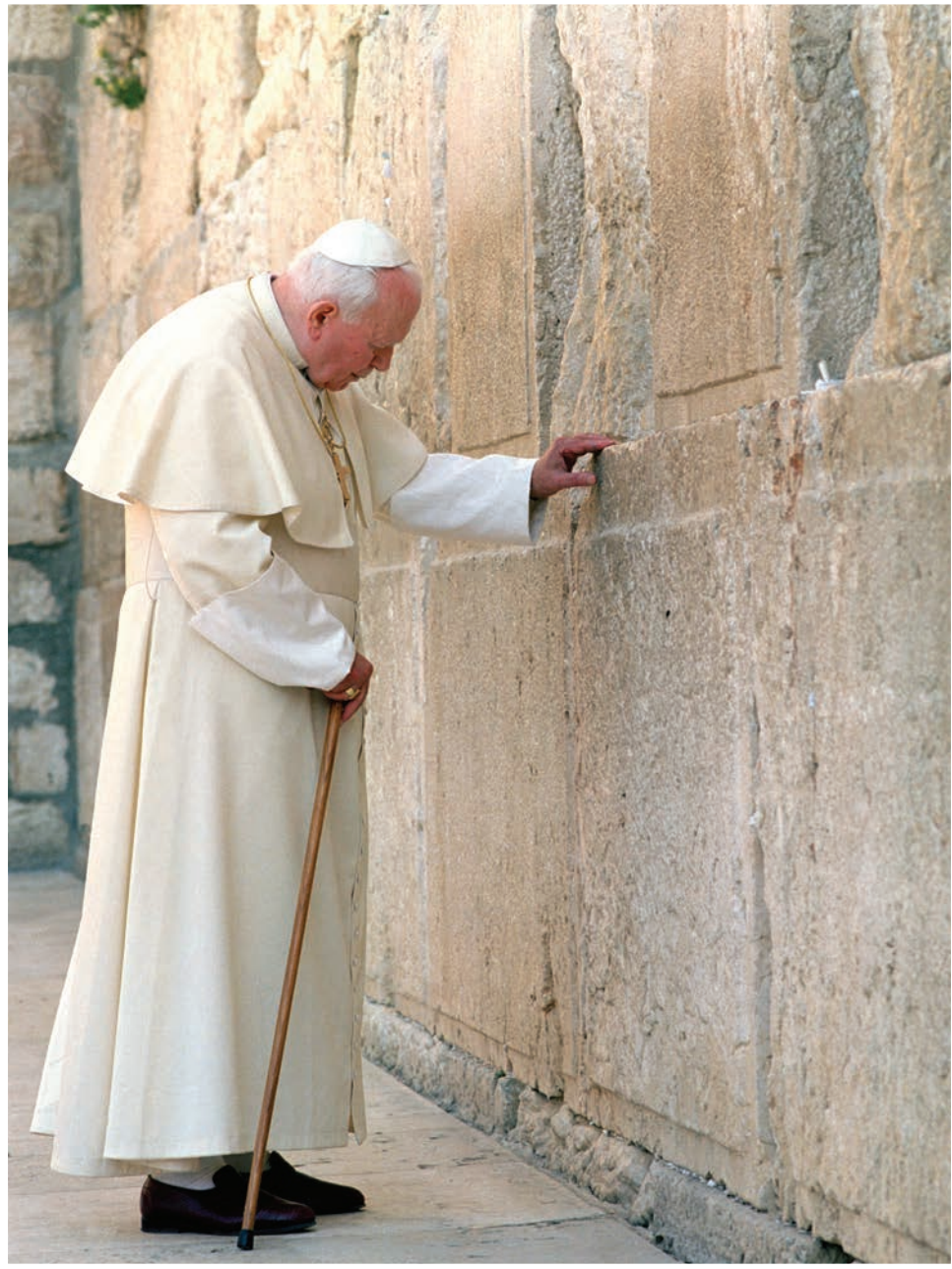
– *Letter to the Elderly, 1999*



“ “The aging experience brings with it a new attitude to time. You now have the opportunity to appreciate each moment of life. It becomes possible for you to stop and admire and be grateful for the ordinary things of life, things like human companionship and solidarity, and the beauty of the world that tells us about the infinitely greater beauty of the Creator.” ”

— Address to the Elderly in Perth, 1986





“You yourselves can experience how time spent without the disturbance of so many occupations can encourage a deeper reflection and a fuller dialogue with God in prayer. Your maturity also spurs you to share with those who are younger the wisdom accumulated with experience, sustaining them in their effort of growth and dedicating time and attention to them at the moment when they are opening themselves to the future and seeking their own way in life. You can accomplish a truly precious task for them.”

— *Homily for the Jubilee of the Elderly, 2000*

“ There is a saying: “When you are lonely, go and visit somebody who is still lonelier than you!” This wisdom I would like to recommend to you. Open your mind for those companions on your road ... whom you can help in one way or the other – through a conversation, through giving a hand, some favor, or at least your expressed sympathy! I promise to you in the name of Jesus: in this you are going to find strength and consolation (cf. Acts 20-35). ” ”

– *Address to the Elderly in Munich, 1980*





“ And you, dear elders, who pray so often with your rosary, think often of the Virgin Mary, living out – according to tradition – the end of her terrestrial life with the Apostle John. Ask her to help you to live this last stage in prayer, in serenity, in attention to others, in beauty! ”

*– Special Audience following
the Beatification of Jeanne Jugan, 1982*

“Despite the limitations brought on by age, I continue to enjoy life. For this I thank the Lord. It is wonderful to be able to give oneself to the very end for the sake of the Kingdom of God! At the same time, I find great peace in thinking of the time when the Lord will call me: from life to life!”

– *Letter to the Elderly, 1999*





“ If you know the eternal Love who created you, you also know that there is an immortal soul within you. There are various seasons in life; if by chance you feel winter approaching, I want you to know that it is not the last season, because the last one will be spring: the springtime of the Resurrection. Your whole life extends infinitely beyond its earthly limits: ”

heaven awaits you.

– *Greeting to the Sick at Fatima, 2000*

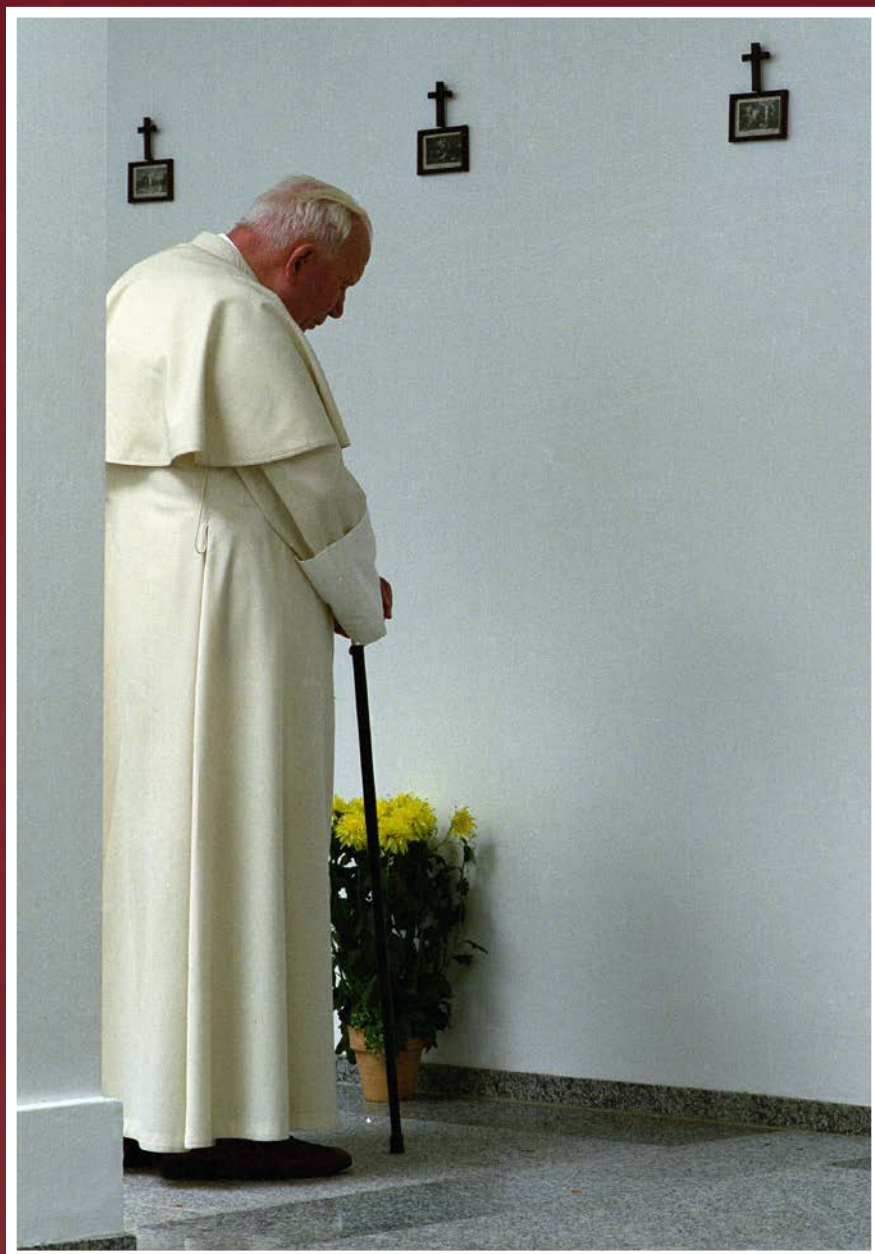
“ One must become accustomed to thinking confidently about the mystery of death, so that the definitive encounter with God occur in a climate of interior peace, in the awareness that He “who knit me in my mother’s womb” (cf. Psalm 139:13b) and who willed us “in his image and likeness” (cf. Gen. 1:26) will receive us. ”

– *Message for Lent, 2005*



“ Christ took upon himself our sufferings, he assumed our pain, casting a new light of hope and life upon them through his Cross and his Resurrection. Dear brothers and sisters, elderly friends! In a world like this which often makes a myth of strength and power, it is your mission to witness to the values which truly count, going beyond appearances, and which endure forever because they are engraved on the heart of every human being and guaranteed by the Word of God. ”

— *Homily for the Jubilee of the Elderly, 2000*





“ Above all it is through your life of prayer – at times accompanied by suffering – that you will help bring the redeeming love of Christ to the world. ”

– *Address to the Elderly in Perth, 1986*

“ If growing old, with its inevitable conditions, is accepted serenely in the light of faith, it can become an invaluable opportunity for better comprehending the Mystery of the Cross, which gives full sense to human existence ... Knowledge of the nearness of the final goal leads the elderly person to focus on that which is essential, giving importance to those things that the passing of years do not destroy.”

— *Message for Lent, 2005*



“When God permits us to suffer because of illness, loneliness or other reasons associated with old age, he always gives us the grace and strength to unite ourselves with greater love to the sacrifice of his Son and to share ever more fully in his plan of salvation. Let us be convinced of this: he is our Father, a Father rich in love and mercy!”

– *Letter to the Elderly, 1999*



“ Let me go to the Father's house ... ”

— *Last words of John Paul II*



“The Holy Father was a priest to the last, for he offered his life to God for his flock and for the entire human family, in a daily self-oblation for the service of the Church, especially amid the sufferings of his final months ... He interpreted for us the paschal mystery as a mystery of divine mercy. In his last book, he wrote: The limit imposed upon evil “is ultimately Divine Mercy” ... And reflecting on the assassination attempt, he said: “In sacrificing himself for us all, Christ gave a new meaning to suffering, opening up a new dimension, a new order: the order of love ...a It is this suffering which burns and consumes evil with the flame of love and draws forth even from sin a great flowering of good.” Impelled by this vision, the Pope suffered and loved in communion with Christ, and that is why the message of his suffering and his silence proved so eloquent and so fruitful.”

– *Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, funeral homily
for John Paul II, April 2005*

∞ Afterword ∞

The photo on the back of this book is a favorite of many Little Sisters. It shows an encounter at the Pope's summer residence in 1993 between John Paul II, our Little Sisters and novices, and two Residents of our home in Marino, Italy. With great simplicity, the Residents offered the Holy Father a basket of home-grown fruit and he embraced them with the affection of a father. The man in the photo is blind, reminding us of Anne Chauvin, a blind elderly woman who was first to be welcomed by our foundress, Saint Jeanne Jugan.

Blessed John Paul II's embrace of the elderly is also symbolic of the Church's affection for older persons and all those considered "the least." In the words of Our Lord, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it for me" (Mt 25:40). These words inspired our foundress, who said, "Never forget that the Poor are Our Lord." They continue to serve as the foundation of the Little Sisters' mission to the elderly poor.

God has given the Little Sisters of the Poor the charism of loving those who are ending their earthly journey. We recognize that the Church has given us a mandate to make the elderly happy and to communicate the concern, kindness and affection that God has for his eldest children. Making the elderly truly happy involves helping them make sense of their sufferings by uniting them to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We thank God for the example of Blessed John Paul II, who wrote so eloquently about the redemptive value of suffering, and who embodied these convictions so strikingly in his own life, giving of himself to the very end for the sake of the Kingdom of God.¹

From the very beginning of our Congregation, Saint Jeanne Jugan envisioned creating a family where the Little Sisters, the elderly and many people of good will share a common spirit of charity and compassion. This sense of solidarity has become a hallmark of our charism. As

the population of seniors grows and their lives are increasingly threatened by the culture of death, solidarity is a powerful sign of the Kingdom of God. It is often said that it takes a whole village to raise a child. The same can be said about the care of our needy and frail elders: It takes a whole community of dedicated individuals – and a shared compassion – to assure the love, comfort and care they deserve.

In November 1986, Pope John Paul II spoke to the Residents and staff of our home in Perth, Australia. He recognized the special vocation of those who dedicate their lives to caring for the elderly, saying, “Yours is not a service that is limited to physical and material things. You have the precious task of helping the older members of the community to turn their later years into a time of fulfillment and completion ... Your work is an enterprise of human solidarity and evangelical love.”

Whether you have received this book as a Resident of one of our homes, as a member of our extended family of care givers and benefactors, as someone interested in the needs of the elderly in today’s society, or simply as someone drawn to the words and example of Blessed John Paul II, we hope that it will inspire you to celebrate the gift of old age and to contribute to the work of “human solidarity and evangelical love” that is the care of the most vulnerable among us.

Notes

¹ cf. John Paul II, “Letter to the Elderly,” 1999.



“Old age is a gift for which we are called to give thanks: a gift for the person on in years, for the society and for the Church. Life is always a great gift.”

— *Blessed John Paul II*