

THE PROTECTIVE HAND OF MARY: LESSONS LEARNED FORTY YEARS AGO

I am pausing my series on the ecumenical councils this week to reflect upon a **memory** that solidified the place that Pope John Paul II has played in my life. Forty years ago this coming Thursday, I was immersed in a class entitled A.P. Biology, an antsy senior in High School, just weeks away from graduation. Suddenly on that day— May 13, 1981— a voice came over the **loudspeaker**. It was our Dean of Students, asking us to pray for the pope, as news came that he had been **shot** in St. Peter's Square. What? A pope, shot? In the Vatican? No other details were forthcoming, as I recall. After the prayer, we resumed class. My mind was distracted even more than usual for a student in the throes of senior slide! But from that moment on, I paid much more attention to the incredible ministry of Pope John Paul II.

Mehmet Ali Ağca, an escapee from a Turkish prison while serving a life sentence for murdering a journalist, fired four shots with a 9-millimeter pistol. The Holy Father was struck in his lower intestine; two bystanders were also wounded. He required a five-hour surgery to repair his damaged abdomen. That **bullet** is now encased in the **crown** of the image of **Our Lady of Fatima**, a gift from the pope in thanksgiving for the intercession of the Blessed Mother, to whom the saintly pope credited his life being spared. The attempt occurred on the feast day of Our Lady of Fatima. Up to that point, I wasn't paying that much attention to the **daily activities** of the pope. I knew that he had been crisscrossing the globe to attend to his flock, and was impressed that he chose **Des Moines**, Iowa while on his first visit to the United States in 1979. In retrospect, I wish I had traveled to the farm field for the Mass.

But when Pope John Paul II **visited** his would-be assassin in prison on December 28, 1983, the image of the two sitting in a stark **prison cell** became one of the most powerful images of forgiveness imaginable, a modern day embrace of the Prodigal son. Then, 31 years to the day after that meeting, and having been released from prison in 2010, Ağca visited Saint Peter's Square and **laid flowers** at the tomb of the pope. Reuters News confirmed the visit with the Vatican's deputy spokesman, who said Ağca stood for a few moments in **silent meditation** over the tomb in St. Peter's Basilica before leaving two bunches of white roses. There is a non-descript stone marking the location of the popemobile was when the shots were fired. It bears in **Roman numerals** the date of the attempt and the coat of arms of John Paul II. Nothing else— if you did not know the reason for the stone, you would most likely walk right over it without even noticing.

Obviously, no one wants to glorify a violent and horrific event, and yet the rapid recovery of the pope coupled with how that event influenced his ministry is remarkable. Looking back at that day, the pope has remarked “one hand pulled the trigger, another **guided** the bullet,” and it was Our Lady of Fatima herself who **saved him** from certain death. The month of May has been traditionally seen as the month dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Since medieval times, we have seen the **link** between **Mary** and the month of **May**. Locally, this month is often when spring is at the height of its beauty, with **nature renewing** itself. In her way, Mary gave new life to the world when she gave birth to our savior Jesus Christ.

The Feast of Our Lady of Fatima is significant for another reason. It marks the day when **Archbishop Hebda** was formally installed as the Ninth Archbishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis. I was privileged to be able to welcome him “officially,” as the rite of reception calls for the Cathedral rector to open the doors after a ceremonial knock. The Archbishop used the only remaining piece of **wood** from the original **log chapel** (1841) that a decade later would become

our first Cathedral. That wood piece, made into a ceremonial mallet, is in safe keeping at the Minnesota History Center. In his inaugural homily, Archbishop Hebda promised– “**I’m all in!**” And he has been. He has visited our parishes, schools, Catholic institutions, and has made countless phone calls, e-mails and text messages filled with **encouraging** words and genuine gratitude to his priests. He **labors tirelessly** on our behalf and **asks little** in return for himself.

When he selected the feast of Our Lady of Fatima for his installation, I was thrilled. We restored a statue that had been in our basement, desperately in need of some TLC. It remains my **favorite statue** in the entire Cathedral and I will always associate it with his arrival. The story of Fatima is ever **valid** and ever compelling. When we commemorated the 100th anniversary of the final appearance to the three children in October 2017, it stands out as the **largest thron**g I can remember attending a liturgy at the Cathedral. The appearance of our Lady at Fatima remains a particular sign of God’s grace in our world and the active role of the Blessed Mother in our lives and in the world. Use this month of May to offer you own “I’m all in” to the Lord. God wants all of us, not just part of us. May the Lord **bless** our Archbishop as he continues to lead us, the faithful of this Archdiocese. May he feel our **prayerful** support. *Ad multos annos.*

- From the “Hmnn, why didn’t I know that?” files... It took me **long enough** to realize that to the Latin language we owe the distinction among hours, minutes and seconds. The Latin word for an hour is *hora*. An hour made smaller is a *hora minuta* (from *minuere* - to lessen, reduce). An hour made **smaller again** is a *hora minuta secunda*. Thus, hours, minutes and seconds.
- Shortly after we purchased an additional 2000 copies of the **Litany of St. Joseph**, the Vatican added seven new invocations! It had been the same since 1909 and new titles includes ones used by St. John Paul II (Guardian of the Redeemer) and Pope Francis (Patron of the Poor). That’s okay—we will exhaust our current supply of prayer cards, and then gladly add the new ones as soon as they are printed.
- Last Monday, in the presence of the Cardinals in Rome, the Holy Father approved the causes of seven new saints. The most recognizable name is that of **Fr. Charles de Foucauld**, the French missionary killed in Algeria in 1916. The list also includes a layman from **India** and two **foundresses** of religious communities for women. Due to the uncertainty of the pandemic, no timetable has been established for the canonization.
- Vatican Cardinal Beniamino Stella, prefect for the Congregation for the Clergy, recently noted that “**nothing will be the same again**” for pastoral life after the pandemic finally subsides. He is spot on. Our reality had changed; the manner in which we communicate (including through radio and livestream) and meet (through Zoom sessions) has changed how we operate as a parish and as a Church. This is neither good nor bad in itself. However, the **reality** is that things will be different and we must **adapt** to these changes.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector



The white marble plaque engraved with the coat of arms of Pope St. John Paul II and the date of the attempted assassination is fixed in the black cobblestones of Piazza San Pietro. The plaque marks the location where he was shot on May 13, 1981, five days before his sixty-first birthday.