John Paul II as an Apostle of Mercy

Interview With Bishop Renato Boccardo

VATICAN CITY, APRIL 3, 2005 (Zenit.org).- John Paul II died at the end of the vigil Mass of Divine Mercy Sunday, the feast that he himself instituted five years earlier for the universal Church.

Bishop Renato Boccardo, recently appointed secretary-general of Vatican City State, led the faithful in prayer in St. Peter's Square after the announcement of the Pope's death. He called John Paul II "the apostle of mercy."

Indeed, the prelate will focus on this topic when he addresses an unprecedented retreat for priests from all over the world. The retreat is scheduled June 20-24 in Krakow, Poland.

In this interview with ZENIT, Bishop Boccardo illustrates the transcendence of the message given by Christ through Sister Faustina Kowalska (1905-1938), the Polish nun and mystic linked to the Divine Mercy devotion.

Q: At the international priests' retreat you have been invited to speak about the Pope as an apostle of mercy. In what way was the Pope an apostle of mercy?

Bishop Boccardo: I think that in the almost 27 years of his pontificate, the Pope has been an apostle of mercy at two levels.

First of all, through his teaching given in various documents and in particular done through his encyclical "Dives in Misericordia." But at the same time, the second dimension is through his gestures. It is his gestures which remain in the memory and conscience of the Church beyond his words.

I'm thinking of the pardon given to his would-be assassin and the visit made to him in prison. I'm thinking of the closeness manifested many times with all those who in a particular way need Divine Mercy. That is to say, those sick with AIDS, elderly abandoned people, the sick in general.

I'm thinking of him on Good Friday in St. Peter's Basilica, welcoming pilgrims with the sacrament of confession, the highest instrument of the mercy of God.

It seems to me that Pope John Paul II linked together words and gestures of mercy. A mercy which manifests itself right there through a caress, a listening ear, through the way he looked intensively at those who suffer.

I'm thinking of the example of mercy -- that of offering the chance of forgiveness during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. Therefore, through his person and through his
teaching, the Pope has recalled the Church to this fundamental dimension of the Christian life.

Q: John Paul II said: "Mercy, unique hope for the world." Why did he give so much importance to Divine Mercy for the future of the world?

Bishop Boccardo: Our postmodern and modern world seems to have experienced every possible way to try to improve its life through scientific and technical progress and yet continues to experience a huge poverty. Let's go back to the words of the Gospel: What worth is it for man to gain the whole world if he loses his own soul?

And our very modern world, so rich in science and technological discoveries, finds itself in the end incapable of finding meaning in its own existence. It finds itself divided within, driven by hate, war and death and struggles to find the strength and reasons to live and hope.

And we Christians believe that our reason and our hope for existing is to be found only in the heart of God. So our postmodern world, plunged in its own poverty, needs to hear more than ever the proclamation of the grace and mercy which comes from above.

It's in accepting this greater mystery, which comes to us gratuitously through mercy, that the world will find the meaning of its existence.

Q: What impact, if any, has the feast of Divine Mercy had on the life of the Church?

Bishop Boccardo: Above all, I believe that this feast of Divine Mercy is a gift that the Pope John Paul II has made to the Church, establishing it on the first Sunday after Easter -- a gift which probably responds to an expectancy in our world which more than ever experiences the need for mercy and goodness.

And we know that the source, the fountain of mercy and goodness is in the heart of God. It is important that the Church becomes ever more, as the Pope said several times, minister of this mercy and goodness of God.

So now, by declaring a day specifically set aside for the celebration and proclamation of the mercy of God, which through the sacrifice of Christ reaches all mankind, this day becomes a work of evangelization.

Q: Why did the Holy Father place the feast of Divine Mercy so close to Easter?

Bishop Boccardo: Celebrating Divine Mercy on the first Sunday after Easter makes for, I would say, a reaffirmation of the greatness of the Easter mystery. God the Father wanting to save humanity sent his Son. And his Son gave his life for humanity. What is this, then, if not the mercy of God?
But of course, Divine Mercy Sunday cannot remain a private devotion. It's a feast that redresses and encompasses the whole of the life of the Church. It is strictly linked to the Easter mystery. The same Easter mystery reveals the mercy of God and the goodness of God with regard to humanity.

Q: Why have two cardinals and two bishops decided to propose this retreat to priests?

Bishop Boccardo: I just have to say that I was present with the Pope in the celebration of the dedication of the sanctuary in Lagiewniki. And I was really struck by what the Pope said during the celebration: "Who would have thought that the young man with wooden clogs on his feet coming home from work every evening and stopping here in the Chapel of Divine Mercy to pray, would one day be coming back as Pope to consecrate this sanctuary."

That's to say, the mysterious story that Divine Providence writes in the life of men -- intensive moments of great emotion.

Then, we also know that from that place, from that shrine the devotion of Divine Mercy radiates throughout the world. Certainly, a richness of grace and blessing. Therefore, I hope and think that this international retreat will be an effusion of grace, a blessing for those who participate in it and through them for Church.

For more information on the retreat, see www.missionariesofmercy.org.