

**Archbishop's House
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Archbishop Kevin's Homily at the Solemn Vespers for Pope John Paul II, held at St
George's Cathedral, Southwark, on 7 April 2005

I reiterate my words of welcome to our guests this evening. Not only is it good to have civic guests, ecumenical guests, and guests from other faiths, our celebration would have been incomplete without your presence. You are part of what we are doing tonight. I think I, like many people, have been quite taken aback by the media coverage of the final illness and of the death of Pope John Paul. It has been huge and overwhelmingly warm, positive, respectful. For us Catholics it has been made very clear that the loss of Pope John Paul is not just a loss for the Catholic Church but for the whole human community. I have really been astonished by the way in which some people writing from a purely secular perspective have found huge significance in this papacy. As a Catholic I feel, and I'm sure we all feel, a very deep sense of the void that is left by the Pope's death. It's hard to imagine the Church without him. But our grief is not a private grief. In a way that would never have been possible in previous times, our loss is shared by people everywhere.

Pope John Paul travelled all over the world and in his travels he did two key things: he confirmed the Catholic faithful in their faith, and he extended the hand of friendship and the offer of dialogue to those outside the Catholic Church. These two things are not in conflict, rather they are inextricably connected. His was a message of reconciliation: of the reconciliation between God and humanity brought about by the death and resurrection of Christ, and precisely from that derives the imperative to work for reconciliation wherever there is conflict and division.

The Pope was a tireless advocate of peace. He had a horror of violence and his condemnation of war as a means of resolving conflict was clear and unequivocal. Indeed, his strongest statement on that was made here in this country, in Coventry in 1982. He was likewise the advocate of the poor and oppressed and they have lost someone who gave them a voice on the international stage. His outreach to the Jewish people was historic and I venture to suggest that its theological and spiritual

significance is not, I think, fully appreciated by everyone. In calling together representatives of other religions to Assisi, he made a bold and courageous move. Not to pray together but to come together to pray. Long before the event of 9/11 he understood deeply the importance of interreligious dialogue for peace in the world. In the area of ecumenism I know, from my own experience working in Rome, the extent of his concern for Christian Unity. I remember being with him the evening before Archbishop Runcie's visit in 1989: there were just four of us at the table and what struck me then, as on the other occasions I met him, was his openness and charity. He had a very deep sense of his own role in the ecumenical journey which he once described as a primacy in the search for unity. He was exemplary in being totally frank and honest about the obstacles to Christian unity while refusing to give way to even the slightest degree of discouragement or cynicism.

And recognising the presence of our civic guests we remember that the Pope was a head of state, and we remember today all he did to build up peace and understanding among the nations of the world. A special feature of his papacy was the crucial role he played in the downfall of Communism, but he made it clear that the freedom he fought for was freedom to worship God. Freedom to live honestly and with integrity in all areas of life including its most personal and most intimate aspects. Freedom to love God and to love others.

We give thanks to God for his life and his journey. Like the disciples travelling to Emmaus, his was a journey of discovery of Christ, a discovery renewed each day in the "breaking of bread". We pray today that he will now discover fully the depth of the love of Christ for him, a love that sustained him throughout a remarkable life and one of the greatest pontificates the Church has seen. May he rest in peace.