

OCTOBER 22 2024 FATHER GORDON

On the 13th of May, 1981, thousands of pilgrims gathered in Saint Peter's Square in Rome to celebrate the memorial of Our Lady of Fatima. Pope John Paul II rode through the crowds in a convertible SUV, known as the "Popemobile," greeting and blessing the people. The warm spring air was filled with cheers as pilgrims greeted the 263rd successor of Saint Peter.

Among the joyful crowd was a young man who stood apart. He was tall and unsmiling, with an olive complexion and disheveled jet-black hair. His eyes narrowed as he fixed his gaze on the Pope, watching his every move. When the Pope was handed a baby to bless, the young man clutched a 9mm semi-automatic pistol concealed under his jacket, waiting for the moment the Pope returned the baby to its mother before taking his shot.

As the Pope's vehicle meandered slowly through the crowd, inching closer to the young man, perspiration dotted the assassin's forehead. When the Pope was only a few feet away, the young man drew his pistol and fired four shots in quick succession. One bullet entered the Pope's torso, another struck his left hand, while the remaining two hit bystanders. Panic erupted among the pilgrims.

The Pope collapsed into the arms of a guard, his white cassock stained with blood. He was rushed to the nearby Gemelli Hospital for emergency surgery. Doctors carefully removed the bullets, discovering one had narrowly missed several vital organs and was lodged only inches from his heart and aorta. The surgery was a success, and the Pope credited his miraculous survival to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin

Mary. Reflecting on the event, the Pope famously said, "One hand pulled the trigger, and another guided the bullets."

Pope John Paul II was convinced that Our Lady's hand had guided the bullet, sparing his life. In today's first reading, Saint Paul speaks of one of the effects of Christ's Passion: the overcoming of divisions and hostilities among human beings. Following the attempt on his life, the Pope demonstrated this in the most radical way, declaring, "Pray for my brother, whom I have sincerely forgiven."

The young man who had attempted to take the Pope's life was not an enemy to be destroyed but a brother to be loved. Pope John Paul II forgave him even before meeting him, without needing an apology. That young man, Mehmet Ali Agca, was a member of the ultra-nationalist Turkish organization known as the Grey Wolves. Agca saw the Pope as an enemy, a living symbol of everything he despised—Christianity, Western culture, and the Crusades. When Agca learned of the Pope's planned visit to Turkey, he decided to try to prevent it by any means necessary.

Two years after the shooting, in 1983, Pope John Paul II visited Agca in his Italian prison cell, where they spoke privately. At the end of their conversation, the Pope shook Agca's hand as a gesture of forgiveness and peace. Agca responded by kissing the Pope's hand. By this act, the Pope reminded the world that loving our enemies and forgiving those who have harmed us can transform even the hardest hearts.

Each of us, in our own lives, may have someone who has hurt us deeply, a personal "Ali Agca." While we are not always required to make

contact with such individuals, forgiveness and love are required. Forgiveness means letting go of the offence and no longer dwelling on it. To love someone is to desire their good, the highest of which is eternal salvation. If we can pray for the salvation of those who have harmed us, we are fulfilling Christ's command to love our enemies.

Despite any lingering negative feelings, if we desire that our enemies be saved, we are expressing love. Through the intercession of Saint John Paul II, may we receive the grace to forgive and love our enemies. For only through forgiveness and love can we break down the walls of hostility and experience the peace that Christ won for us on the cross.