

OCTOBER 22 2025 FATHER PETER JAE CHOI

On May 13th, 1981 Pope John Paul II was passing through the thousands of faithful gathered in St Peter's Square blessing the crowds from his Popemobile, just before the weekly general papal audience began. Then, suddenly the 23 year old Turkish hitman and a convict Mehmet Ali Agca, fired four shots from close range, one hit the Pope's lower abdomen, another one to his left hand and the third to his right arm. Pope John Paul II collapsed into the arms of his priest secretary and the Popemobile quickly drove away from the crowd. He was rushed to Gemelli hospital where he underwent five hour long emergency surgery. By the grace of God he made a full recovery. The doctors who examined the wounds discovered that the bullet that struck him in his abdomen miraculously travelled around the major artery, thus saving his life. It would otherwise have been a fatal shot. Pope John Paul II attributed his life being spared to the intercession of Our Lady of Fatima, as this happened on her feast day. In his words, "one hand pulled the trigger, another guided the bullet." On the one year anniversary of the assassination attempt, Pope John Paul travelled to Fatima, Portugal, and consecrated the world to Our Blessed Mother with an Act of Entrustment to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He also presented the bullet that was removed from his body and welded it into the Crown of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal, as a symbol of his gratitude to her.

On the Sunday morning after the shooting, Pope John Paul II addressed the faithful in a recorded message from his hospital bed with the following words, "Pray for my brother whom I have sincerely forgiven," Two years after the incident, the Pope visited Agca in prison. He had a private meeting with him for over 20 minutes. As the Pope was leaving the prison, he shook Agca's hands and also gave him a rosary. In addition to having forgiven his would-be assassin, he went the great length to even request a presidential pardon for Agca for his crime. In June of 2000, in the year of the Holy

Jubilee, then president Carlo Azeglio Ciampi granted Agca the presidential pardon and extradited him to Turkey.

So why did Agca try to assassinate the Pope? There's a rumour that the assassin was connected to the Bulgarian intelligence who were acting on behalf of the KGB. It was due to the Pope's firm stance against Communism. So what did Pope John Paul II have to do with Communism?

Two years prior to the attempt on his life, on June 2, 1979, Pope John Paul II visited his native Poland for the first time since he was elected as Pope. The Pope's visit was a threat to the Communist Poland that was under martial law. As a result, his visit was met with a heavy military presence and barricades blocking the roads. It was not only their attempt to get a handle on crowd control, but also trying to intimidate the people and suppress any pro-solidarity demonstrations. When Pope John Paul arrived at the Okęcie military airport, as soon as he got off the plane, knelt and kissed the ground. More than a million people came out to the streets to greet the Pope, cheering and throwing flowers and applauding and singing. Even churches that had been silent for a very long time began ringing their bells. In the Victory Square, where Pope John Paul celebrated the Mass, the Pope gave what his biographer George Weigel called "his greatest sermon." The pope asked, "why had God lifted a Pole to the papacy? Perhaps it was because of how Poland had suffered for centuries, and through the 20th century had become the land of a particularly responsible witness to God." The people of Poland, he suggested, had been chosen for a great role, to understand, humbly but surely, that they were to be the repository of a special "witness of His cross and His resurrection." He then asked them if they would accept the obligations of such a role in history. The crowd responded with thunder, shouting, "We want God! We want God!" This went on for ten minutes. It was on that day the day Soviet Communism fell. Pope John Paul had started what people called the revolution of conscience. It was the pebble that started the avalanche that changed the geopolitical situation of not only East and Central Europe, but of the whole world. Millions and millions of Polish

people went home that day knowing that Communism was a lie. Communism eventually ended ten years later in 1989.

Pope John Paul was a missionary at heart. His mission had been reaching out to people and gathering the scattered in order to lead them to Christ. He visited 129 countries, and established World Youth Day to reach out to the youth. Pope John Paul was not only a Pope but also my hero. I was born in the year Pope John Paul II became the Pope, and he died just one year before I was ordained a Priest. Pope John Paul II was the only Pope I ever knew growing up. I admired him for his witness to hope even during the darkest hours of oppression from communism, and him living out Christ's command to loving and forgiving unconditionally, even his enemy.

Another gift he had was the gift of presence, or more precisely God's presence in him. Those who had met him in person all said that if you met Pope John Paul II and once his eyes locked with yours, you felt his presence and intense love. You could be in a room with hundreds of others, but everybody else seemed to just fade away, and you felt as if you were alone in the room with him. But today, we on the other hand, could be right next to each other but forget to be present to each other. So often I see people who are right next to each other but are busy with their own mobile devices, ignoring the person next to them. Learning to love others like Jesus begins with putting God at the centre of our lives. When God becomes the centre of our lives others will begin to notice. Faith becomes the foundation of our life and love becomes the way of our life. Then we will be able to impart blessings to others with love that is rooted in faith and hope, as Pope John Paul did.