



Meeting A ‘Saint’ Can Change A Career and Life - by Bob Rucker.

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Some handshakes you never forget. But the late Pope John Paul II had one of the warmest and most comfortable I have ever felt. Combine that with gentle but probing eyes, and his ability to empower while putting people at ease was simply uncanny. This weekend I will think fondly about a newly canonized saint in the Catholic Church who profoundly changed my future, and many others.

My chance encounter was not at the Vatican. It came while I was broadcasting on live television in Philadelphia. In 1979, I was a local reporter for the NBC station, and I asked (no insisted) covering some part of the Pope’s first visit to America for both professional and personal reasons. In journalism, the chance to cover a major world figure is always a memorable assignment. To be in a position to possibly speak with someone like this is always a goal and thrill. It’s a challenge because as it unfolds, you must have the presence of mind to ask good questions despite the press of the crowd or the schedule. You’re on the front lines of history daily. You never know how the moment will be recorded and remembered.

Truth be told though, my biggest motivation came from the fact that I was baptized and raised as a Roman Catholic. I had read and heard a lot about the person called the direct descendent to St. Peter, the close friend Jesus chose to lead His Church. But when you grow up in America, especially in the ghetto and poor neighborhoods on the Southside of Chicago, you never image meeting the Holy Father. So on a beautiful fall day in October, I brow beat my TV station operations manager to get that assignment. As it turned out the station, our TV viewers, and I all got more than we ever imagined.

John Paul II made several stops that day in the City of Brotherly Love. Eventually he would attend a neighborhood church service. TV cameras had planned for this and were all set up. Huge crowds of children and families lined both sides of the entrance hoping to get a smile or wave. When he arrived, the energetic Pope, a true people-person, immediately walked over to shake hands and hug the children on one side. I unfortunately was on the opposite side with a group of children who felt left out. I’m reporting the moment live on local TV to millions of viewers and noting both the emotions of joy and disappointment. When the pope entered the church, the station switched inside for the service. I began talking to the children on my side saying “make some noise and invite him come over when he leaves.” Sure enough they did, and when John Paul II saw the huge uproar next to me, he smiled and headed in our direction.

I was at the front with my microphone explaining to the home TV audience. John Paul II now had to pass by me to get to his car. As he drew closer, I stretch out my microphone to speak to him. Suddenly a secret service agent pushed my hand down abruptly as to signal no interviews. John Paul II saw that,

quickly reached for my hand with the mic, and brought it back up to his face, and said to me “Hello! How are you?” He held my hand as we talked ever so briefly as to let the agents know this was his choice. The Pope looked me in the eye, said how much he loved America, and ended our chat saying “God Bless You.” That very brief moment felt like an eternity on live TV, but soon he was whisked off to his next stop.

During it all, I kept talking to the local audience describing the scene and the Pope’s demeanor, plus asked him some questions. What followed was astonishing. Everyone around me, the children and adults were all smiling and crying at the same time. That included me. My station producer was saying in my ear piece, “WOW! That was so powerful Bob. Stand-by we are coming back to you soon to ask you what that moment with the pope meant to you.” Now, I felt scared. I was being asked to do something reporters should not do, namely share their personal feelings while reporting. I balked at the notion saying that would not be appropriate. My producer insisted. “Explain the moment Bob, just talk.” So I did. I told our nearly four million viewers that “was very powerful moment for me because most catholics never go to Rome or actually meet the head of their church. I certainly never expected to feel such warmth, calm and peace with someone in the center of great noise and strong emotions.” The rest of my actual comments are a blur, but later someone said you made us cry tears of joy for you. When I finished, and returned to our newsroom, I was stunned to get a standing ovation from everyone. One cameraman quickly rushed up to me saying “Which hand? Which hand touched the Pope?” When I held it out, he put his rosary in it, smiled and said “thank you.” What a remarkable day that was.

For months people would come up and say “I saw you with the Pope, and I could feel what it meant to you.” I quickly realized how much people care about spiritual matters, even the non-religious. Whether it’s the Dalai Lama or the Pope, it’s what they represent in the world, their hope and belief in humanity, that inspires and moves people.

Ironically, Pope John Paul II’s conservative views and policies actually empowered Christians like me to come back, offer my gifts to the church, and push for more non-judgmental and welcoming approaches like Jesus. The man who held my hand in Philly, and talked like Christ to this stranger in 1979, helped me feel proud to share my feelings and faith that day, trusting that my journalistic reputation could not be jeopardized by an honest display of my personal truths.

I will celebrate Saint John Paul II, and be a strong supporter of our current Holy Father. When Pope Francis declared “Who am I to judge?” he created a global sensation that spoke to hearts and minds all across the earth. His simple words have inspired new thinking among modern day Christians. Nearly 34 years earlier, however, another dynamic new pontiff dared, through simple acts of kindness, to lift worldwide spirits by showing genuine love for everyone in the human family.

Truths like those should be televised and shared every day.



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