

He was the grandfather of their souls

By Joan Chittister, OSB

National Catholic Reporter

April 8, 2005

<http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/update/conclave/>

Rome - By the time you read this, Rome will already have buried its bishop. But as I write this, at the Vatican the last person is still filing past the bier of Pope John Paul II and stragglers are still straining to taste some part of the history of this moment.

Most interesting of all, perhaps, is that like all the family wakes I ever attended as a child, this final day of viewing has been a day of story telling.

One series of them, in particular, fascinated me. "The really interesting thing," a British journalist told me, "is that I had no press pass and couldn't get beyond the barriers so I simply stood and took pictures of the crowd." Then, clearly trying to understand what he saw, he paused a moment before he continued: "When I looked at my pictures later, I realized that I hadn't seen a person in the line who was over 25." Another pause: "What do we make of that?"

The question struck me. What do we make of the fact that so many of the young, in a culture that is youth-centered, have made such efforts to be here for the funeral of an 84 year old pope?

More than that, what do we, as a church, make of that in the face of the emphasis on youthful youth ministers. One diocese in the United States, for instance, has just fired three nun chaplains at the local Newman Center. The priest director explains the move on the grounds that they want younger ministers who can better identify with college students. They want to begin a "new'evangelization" that nuns over 50, apparently, cannot manage with the younger generation.

I couldn't help but wonder what this particular diocese would have said if John Paul II had applied for the job.

I also couldn't help but wonder, however, what exactly it was that bound this pope in a special way to the young of this generation. Maybe the answer is far simpler than we realize.

Maybe the answer has something to do with grandparents. We live in a society where grandparents and the notion of the extended family are almost a thing of the past. We call it "the nuclear family" but we mean that people are born in one state, raised in a second, educated in a third, employed in a fourth and retired in a fifth. As a result, they lose their roots, their relatives, and, for both the old and the young, their sense of generational connections.

Grandparents, in a culture such as this, are people who live at a distance and send Christmas packages. They are not people who take a child fishing anymore or give them silly bear hugs or smile at them in particularly indulgent ways. Maybe this pope and his quiet patience with their music, their cheers, their wild applause and roaring chants gave them a touch of that.

Maybe he was the grandfather of their souls, the sign of wisdom to them, rather than authority, the model of the good life and the ideals they seek.

Maybe that's a lesson to the rest of us, as well. Cutting off institutional ties between the old and the young -- just when the young need adults around them people who are more wisdom figures than either authority figures or professionals trying to be peers -- may not be doing either group a favor. This pope and these young people remind us that the old are not too brittle to bring anything of value to the young and the young are not too superficial to recognize it.

Or, as one of the story-tellers on this final day of the people's wake reminded us, when someone asked this Holy Father how he was doing, he cocked his tilted head on his bent over shoulders and gave his enquirer a knowing look. Then, with a twinkle in his eye he said, "From the neck down, not too well; from the neck up, fine."

It's a good story for a culture on the verge of substituting ageism for wisdom to remember.