

Homily based on the readings from February 23, 2025 (1 Samuel 26.2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23; 1 Corinthians 15.45-49; Luke 6.27-38)

If you have been following the news over the past week, I am sure that – amidst the sound and fury of the latest political disputes – you have heard something about the medical difficulties being faced by our Holy Father, Pope Francis. I have no special insight into his condition, but it is clear that the situation has been – and continues to be – extremely serious. Whenever you get a chance, please take a few moments to pray for the Holy Father – and for all the doctors and nurses entrusted with his care.

These developments have put me in mind of another event – which many of us can *vividly* remember and of which *all* of us are certainly aware. On May 13, 1981, a lone gunman shot and nearly killed Pope Saint John Paul II as he was riding through a crowd of 20,000 people in Saint Peter's Square. There are many *astounding* aspects of this incident. First and foremost, one of the bullets passed within millimeters

of fatally damaging the Pope's vital organs. The Holy Father, in fact, explicitly attributed his survival to the miraculous intercession of Our Lady of Fatima, whose memorial was being celebrated that day.

Secondly, the would-be assassin was initially apprehended by an Italian nun – which, to be honest, is not actually *all* that surprising to anyone who has ever met an Italian nun. The most *astonishing* occurrence, though, came more than two years later – when Pope John Paul, fully recovered from his injuries, visited the prison cell of the young man who had tried to murder him.

The photographs taken at that meeting are indelibly etched into my memory. The two men are sitting in a corner of the room, with the gunman's chair pushed up against an old-fashioned radiator. The pope is wearing his typical white cassock, while the gunman is dressed in a simple blue outfit. What is most striking, though, is the *attitude* the Holy Father displays toward his would-be assassin. Looking at his face, one cannot detect the *slightest* hint of anger or resentment or even sadness. Instead, the Holy Father is offering counsel and comfort to his

attacker, praying *with* him and *for* him. That, my brothers and sisters, is the true model of a Christian.

Unfortunately, the world in which we live is dishearteningly accustomed to acts of senseless violence. Whenever we hear about a shooting or a stabbing or a bombing, we may be deeply saddened – but we are never really surprised. On the other hand, the world is not *nearly* as familiar with unconditional forgiveness. That is precisely why the Pope’s visit to his would-be assassin is so utterly *amazing* – even to lifelong practitioners of the Gospel.

The prophetic witness of Saint John Paul II was truly remarkable, but it was hardly unprecedented. Every Christian martyr, from Saint Stephen onward, forgave and even prayed for his murderers. Some of you may be familiar with the case of Saint Maria Goretti, an eleven-year-old girl who was stabbed *fourteen times* after an attempted rape. Just before she died, she begged God to forgive the man who had killed her. After serving 27 years in prison, that man – Alessandro Serenelli – repented of

his sins and begged Maria's mother for forgiveness. He later became a Capuchin friar, and actually attended Saint Maria's canonization ceremony in Saint Peter's Square.

All the saints, of course, take their inspiration and their example from the same source: Jesus Christ himself. Although the principles of forgiveness and self-sacrifice are present in *every* aspect of Christ's teachings, they are stated with *particular* clarity in today's Gospel:

love your enemies,

do good to those who hate you,

bless those who curse you,

pray for those who mistreat you.

To the person who strikes you on one cheek,

offer the other one as well.

As we all know, Jesus fully and completely embodied these words when he died upon the Cross for our salvation. As he was enduring the *agony*

and *humiliation* of the Crucifixion, he took the time to pray for his executioners: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

As we reflect upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – as well as the heroic witness of the thousands of men and women the Church has recognized as saints and blessed – it is reasonable to wonder how *we* might possibly fit into that picture. How can *any* of us hope to compare to the sanctity and selflessness of Saint John Paul II or Saint Maria Goretti – let alone of Christ himself? The answer, of course, is that we are simply expected to do the best we can in *whatever* situations God decides to place us. We may never find ourselves having to forgive a would-be assassin – or possibly we may. In either case, every single one of us has the opportunity, every single day, to “love [our] enemies and do good to them.” That is the truest way to follow Christ’s example, and the surest path to the heavenly homeland he has prepared for all his faithful children.