CENTER VALLEY – The world sheds a tear. Candles are being lit, but one man’s flame has gone out. The bells of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome have tolled for all the world to hear the death of Pope John Paul II.

Yet even in death, this pope speaks. Master communicator and dramatist on the world’s stage during his more than twenty-six years in the chair of Peter, John Paul’s last days captivated people’s attention around the globe, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. Extensive media coverage here in the U.S. documented his demise and shown a spotlight on the place where he was to perish. In the stillness of a Roman night, backlit by the solitary glow from a few windows in the papal palace, John Paul’s message could still be heard.

His is a message about life – that it is always worth living. At first, we heard the vibrant greeting of the archbishop of Krakow who, being the first non-Italian in 455 years to be elected pope, nevertheless greeted the world as bishop of Rome in fluent Italian. At last, we saw him fighting to speak from his window even when he could not vocalize the words; still, everyone welcomed his blessing.

His is a message about suffering – that it is to be embraced. He was shot. He broke his bones. He had to have his appendix removed, as well as a tumor on his colon. He caught the flu. He ran a fever. His breathing became forced. His system went into septic shock. His organs began to fail. Yet through it all, he could note that “I am happy, and you (his aides) should be as well.” Human life, in John Paul’s view, is never a burden to be endured, its struggles not something to be avoided. Life, in all its forms, is a gift, its value inherent to being alive.

His is a message about death – that it is the gateway to eternity. However it was that he communicated his wish, the decision that John Paul made not to return to the hospital spoke volumes. Knowing that death is the reality that confronts us all, he chose to stay home,
remaining near his people, within the arms of Bernini’s colonnade that embraces all who visit St.
Peter’s square. There he embodied the bioethical principles he taught, that life need not be
sustained by extraordinary measures, nor should it be abandoned without nutrition and hydration.
In his passing is fulfilled the prayer the Church so often recites, that in death life is changed, not
ended.

And his is a message about faith – that it is essential to human flourishing. In him we see that
religiosity is not an opiate deluding the psyche, but a spirit enlivening the person. In him we see
that creedal beliefs are not logical dictates leading to dissension, but spiritual truths that guide
human life. In him, and in all those around the world who kept vigil for him, faith proved to be a
profoundly personal impulse, one though which the deepest meaning of our existence is
displayed. In the end, just as he preached from his first day as pope, faith in God is what enables
us to “be not afraid.”

In the days to come, numerous commentators will add their own words to his, chronicling the life
and achievement of this historic figure. They will analyze his political impact on the world, as
its foremost champion of human freedom and dignity, and as one who changed the course of
history through his influence in bringing down communism. They will dissect his decisions as
leader of the Church, whose stalwart promotion of its teachings leaves no doubt that the truths of
which he spoke were not his own to keep or change, but remain what have been handed on to
him and to all the faithful by Christ.

Were I to muse on what will be the legacy of John Paul II, I would highlight a trinity of
characteristics: his charisma, his courage, and his conviction. It’s easy to see how his personal
charm captured the hearts of people throughout the world. In travels to 129 different nations,
and speeches before more than 18 million people during audiences in Rome, John Paul II gave a
new face to the Church, one more personable than his predecessors, one with whom people in all
walks of life could relate.

Behind that charisma, though, he spoke with an indefatigable courage. Buoyed by a truly
philosophical mind and a keenly insightful intellect, his words reflected a staunch defense of
human rights, particularly in favor of the downtrodden and the oppressed. Whether before
dictators or dissidents, John Paul II never shied away from moral principles; even when its
reception might be unpopular, his message insisted that the “splendor of truth” leads to the
“gospel of life” and the springtime of a new millennium.

The courage that suffused his life and his teaching was borne from a twofold conviction. As he
laid out in what would become a programmatic first encyclical letter to the world, he believed
with all his mind and heart and soul that Jesus Christ is the redeemer of humanity. From this he
reckoned that life is worth living, that suffering can be embraced as a gift, and that death
transforms us for eternal life. And with this twofold conviction he became a “witness to hope.”

By some mysterious act of providence, the period of mourning that now accompanies the pope’s
death coincides with the Easter season, in which Christianity celebrates the triumph of the
resurrection. Many will be sad that their “holy father” has “returned to his Father’s home.”
Anyone who has ever been in his presence will remember the unique experience of that encounter.

Yet his words do not end. Despite the windows to his rooms being shuttered and sealed, his life and his legacy continue to speak to us who still live, in that hope that we will not cease trying to build a “civilization of love.”

(Rev. Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S. is director of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University in Center Valley.)