

Before John Paul II became Pope in 1978 he was Karol Wojtyla, Archbishop of Krakow in Poland. As such, he had a difficult calling because it was a difficult time. Poland, after suffering terribly from the Nazi occupation during World War II had been occupied, in turn, by the Soviet Union. Part of the oppression experienced by the Poles was the result of an atheistic power trying to control a people steeped in Catholicism. From every Polish town and village there rose the steeple of an ancient church to underline the clear contrast and tension between the Polish people and their Marxist masters. The Communist Party in the years after the Second World War thought of itself as the wave of the future, and the Catholicism of the people was seen as the fading past, doomed to extinction. In the 1950s the Communists had a perfect opportunity, they thought, to prove this theory. The government decided to build a brand new town from scratch on the outskirts of Krakow – Nowa Hutta. Nowa Hutta was to be a model town of the new Marxist world, centered on factories equipped with the latest technology for the enlightened proletariat. It was to be up to date in every way. And best of all, it was to be the first city in the history of Poland to be built without a church. This was to be a community built to glorify Man, not some make-believe God.

As the town of Nowa Hutta took shape the Archbishop of Krakow felt he had to act. The souls of Nowa Hutta needed and deserved a church. But in Communist Poland there could be no construction of a church without official permission and none was forth-coming. What was Archbishop Wojtyla to do?

He decided to create a fact to which the government would have to respond. He assigned a priest to the people of Nowa Hutta for a church and parish that did not exist. And every Sunday that priest went to an open field in Nowa Hutta where the church should have been and he celebrated mass outdoors. Rain or shine he offered mass and the people came in their thousands. For years and years that huge crowd gathered in the fields of Nowa Hutta, to establish by their presence a fact: that they were God's people, not the state's.

Finally, in 1967, after endless requests by Archbishop Wojtyla, the government allowed the Catholics of Nowa Hutta a building permit – but no access to materials, which in that controlled economy seemed to doom the project once again. But the faithful begged, bought, or borrowed bricks, sheet metal, electric wire, everything needed to build a huge church. For ten years the people contributed their own labor – after first putting in full days at their jobs. The church they built had its own unique design. It was designed in the shape of a gigantic Noah's Ark. It is now universally known as the Ark Church because its shape perfectly represents its function. That church is the Ark that saw the faithful of Nowa Hutta through the storm of imposed atheism that lasted, not forty days and nights, but some forty years. At the dedication mass on May 5, 1977, when the church was finally finished, Archbishop Wojtyla, wiping away tears, told the people that their faith had proven that Nowa Hutta was a city of the children of God after all.

I told you the story of Nowa Hutta because I thought it illustrates the very nature of the Church. The Church is not a building. It is people, people standing for years in a field to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. But the story of Nowa Hutta also demonstrates that it is normal and good that this people of God DO create and support the physical buildings and other means with which to worship and live out the gospel. There are physical realities and a material dimension to the Church. There is good reason that we use the same word, "church," to describe both the souls of Christ's Body, and the buildings, the Arks, that they worship in. They are connected.

And this flock needs good shepherds patterned after Christ. It was the deep abiding faith of the people of Nowa Hutta that brought forth that victory against atheism. But it would not have happened without the Archbishop's vision, courage and coordination efforts. The Church of Christ is not individual, isolated believers. It is not just parish communities. It is also dioceses, united around a bishop ordained as Successor to the Apostles – as we just heard St. Paul and St. Barnabas do for the bishops of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch in our first reading from Acts. When all these elements support one another the People of God can change the world – even in the face of the fiercest opposition.

Today is Commitment Sunday for our Annual Catholic Appeal. Last week Melissa gave her own witness talk describing why she thinks it is so important that we all support our Archbishop and the ministries of the wider Church here in western Washington. I will add only a few words of my own. We need good shepherds. And a parish can't call and educate them on its own. We have around 30 young men currently studying for the priesthood in our Archdiocese. These men wish to give their lives to you, the Church. But because their education and formation is so constant they can't hold down other jobs. And the seminary is not cheap, over \$30,000 a year per seminarian.

Perhaps I focus on seminarians because I'm a priest and I want someone to follow in my footsteps some day. But there are many other ministries that the appeal also supports from soup kitchens to homeless shelters, and more. None of these needs can be met by the wealth of an individual parish. They need the resources and coordination of the entire Archdiocese. We are one people gathered into many parishes all over western Washington, but united and led by our own Archbishop and shepherd. And when we support him we support one another in the mission Christ gave in today's gospel, "I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you."

The people of Nowa Hutta dedicated their time, talent, treasure and love to their church or it would not have existed. This parish is not in Nowa Hutta. I do not claim the endurance of the Pastor who persevered in the elements for decades. And I'm sure Archbishop Burnett doesn't compare himself to John Paul II. But we are called to echo their courageous faith in a sometimes hostile world. And we are united to them because we are of the same people and the same Church serving and sustained by the same Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Please continue the great tradition that Holy Family has always shown in support of the Church and your shepherd by giving this year to the Appeal. By doing so you too will continue to proclaim a fact; that, in the face of a world that would tell you otherwise, we are and will always remain children of God following the mission of His Son.