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## Clergy POPE SERVES AS PERSONAL INSPIRATION

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The world recently marked the 25th year of Pope John Paul II's leadership as bishop of Rome and chief pastor of the Roman Catholic Church.

Leadership is judged on two levels, the first being the extent of that leadership and the second being its quality — its impact on humanity for good or ill. For a quarter of a century, John Paul II has exercised one of the most influential and far-reaching



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leaderships in the modern world. The extent of his travel, the number of contacts with people at all levels of society and the quantity of his writings give ample evidence of his broad influence. But what can be said of the quality of that impact? One can find both Catholics and others who will debate at length and with varying degrees of passion the positive and negative aspects of his time in office. While quality of his impact on humanity will only be able to be completely understood and judged in the long perspective of history, it is safe to say that his has been a loud voice for human rights, the poor, peace and reconciliation and, of course, for the Christian gospel.

I would, however, like to offer my perspective of his impact not on the world scene, but on my own life as a believing, practicing Catholic pastor.

I have had various encounters with the Holy Father, in the United States and abroad. He certainly does not know me and the only personal exchange was a greeting and a handshake in his library one morning after Mass. There are three experiences involving John Paul II that have become defining moments for me in the practice of my own faith and ministry.

The first was during his first visit to America in Philadelphia at a Mass for the clergy and seminary students of the country. I was a 25-year-old deacon, in the last year of my studies for the priesthood. During that Mass, he called us to the permanence of our vocations. "We do not return the gift [of a call to the priesthood] once it is given. How could God who asked for a yes want a no?"

The second was the picture of him sitting with Mehmet Ali Agca in an Italian prison, forgiving the man who attempted to kill him. The third was during his pastoral visit to Cuba. I was never so proud of our pope as when I watched him on that January Sunday in Havana, his hand trembling from Parkinson's disease while holding the text of his homily, as he courageously and energetically proclaimed our faith in the square where Castro had so often proclaimed the lack of faith.

The first of these encounters has inspired and sustained in me fidelity to and surety in God's call on my life. As a young man on the verge of ordination, I had little clue how many times I would be challenged to continue toward ordination and then to continue in ordination. John Paul's words from the psalm, "You are a priest forever!" have rung in my heart as each challenge arose over these 25 years.

His outstretched hand to his would-be assassin has motivated the courage and willingness to continually seek human reconciliation and concord, to extend forgiveness to those who have in some way harmed me.

I will not be around when history makes its long-term judgment of John Paul II's impact on the late 20th and early 21st centuries. But from a personal perspective, no other leader has made such an extensive impact on my life for the good.

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