

Statement by Liz O'Donnell on Pope John Paul II

12th April 2005

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I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to these expressions of sorrow and appreciation on the death of Pope John Paul II.

As a champion and advocate of human rights and human dignity for the duration of his papacy, Pope John Paul II sought and achieved radical change throughout the world, including in some of the most difficult places and especially in his beloved Poland, throughout Eastern Europe and in South America and Africa.

The world has lost a true hero who personified all that is wonderful in the human condition.

While I disagreed with the Pope on certain issues such as contraception and the role of women in the church - their absence from ministering the church diminishes the institution - he held his views sincerely and one must respect them.

As late as last year, when it was obvious his health was failing badly, the Pope continued to urge the world to help those most in need. In so doing, he proclaimed the essential message of Christianity and the church's true mission of eradicating the scourge of hunger and chronic under-development in the world.

He prayed that God would "sustain the efforts of the international community aimed at justice and solid development." This, he stated, was the path which could guarantee to the world a future of peace, a view frequently cited by United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, who points out that eradicating global poverty is not only a matter of charity but also of enlightened self-interest.

This is an area in which we can best honour the Pope's legacy. While words of tribute are well justified, those with the privilege of political office should act in areas under our responsibility.

Tonight, around the world, more than 800 million people will go to bed hungry. Approximately 3 billion people have no clean water or sanitation, while half the population of Africa lives in extreme poverty on less than one dollar per day. Deputies will agree that in a world of unprecedented plenty this is an unconscionable and reversible position. Every day, 15,000 people in Africa die from preventable and treatable diseases.

I and many other Deputies have seen at first hand the tremendous work being done by Irish and other international aid workers in Africa and elsewhere. Funding from the Irish Government and other rich countries makes a considerable difference to the lives of millions in the developing world, particularly in Africa where needs are greatest.

Once one has seen suffering abated, hunger sated and fear give way to hope as a result of aid funding and education programmes, it is impossible to turn away. Once one has seen the

scale of unmet needs and become aware that lives are saved by intervention, action becomes not a political choice but a moral imperative.

This House and the Government, in our full senses, made a solemn commitment to the international community to double the Irish aid budget to 0.7% of GNP within a timeframe which has, sadly, been allowed to slip. There could be no stronger testament to the deceased Pope than for Ireland to hold to our firm commitment to the developing world and urge others in the rich world to reach the millennium development goals to which all rich countries signed up to mark the millennium.

John Paul II demanded of the church leadership in helping the oppressed of the world. Last February, in one of his last addresses, he told the world diplomatic community that providing food and ending hunger is one of the greatest challenges facing humanity today.

Irish people, with our memory of the great famine, have a particular identification with the catastrophe of mass hunger and famine and an onerous responsibility to give world leadership in this area.

That would be a fitting memory to our beloved Pope.

May he rest in peace.