

Chapter Thirteen

Catholic Renewal in Modern Times: 2. The Achievement of John Paul II

Purpose: This talk can help young Christians, especially young Catholics, develop a stronger sense of what renewal of the Catholic Church means. It can help them to get a sense of the movement of the Holy Spirit at this point in history. It can motivate them to learn more about John Paul II and especially to read and study his most important teachings. It can help young Christians primarily influenced by the charismatic movement to get a bigger vision beyond sudden visitations of the Holy Spirit to understand the impact of the Church on the world today.

Presentation: We should remember that with the younger generation John Paul II may well soon become part of past history. It could be helpful to invite witnesses from those a few years older who saw John Paul II, for example at World Youth Days. It is particularly important to make them aware of the dignity of the human person, a theme very central for John Paul II, a point not stressed enough in many charismatic circles. When this teaching is being given in Eastern Europe, where more overt anti-Semitism often remains, especially in the older generation (often their parents), full use should be made of John Paul II's love for the Jewish people since the friendships of his childhood.

The Historical Setting

John Paul II was elected Pope in October, 1978. He became the first non-Italian Pope for over 450 years. 1978 was just 13 years after the completion of the Second Vatican Council, in which he had taken part as a young bishop. What did he bring to the office of Pope? First, he brought a unique experience of life under totalitarian oppression, first the Nazis (1939 - 45) and then under Soviet Communism. He had begun his studies living in the Archbishop's palace in Kraków, a kind of underground seminary. In his home town of Wadowice, 20% of the population before the war had been Jewish. He went to school with Jews and he had Jews among his closest friends. For the most part, he had no idea after the war how many of them had perished in the Holocaust and how many had survived. During his studies for the priesthood and as a young priest, he acquired two doctorates, one in philosophy (studying the German philosopher Edmund Husserl) and one in spirituality (studying St John of the Cross). Philosophy and spirituality greatly shaped his character and his contribution to the Church.

Living under the oppression of an atheist ideology, Karol Wojtyła realized that the greatest need in fighting Communism was to present a fully Christian vision of the human person in society that would combat atheistic materialism, while doing justice to the truth within it concerning the social character of man. He saw that the dominant philosophy in Catholic formation (neo-Scholasticism trying to recover the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas) was not capable of providing an adequate answer to the Marxist challenge. So as a young professor of philosophy in Lublin he gathered around him other young professors and priests to work on this task. In contrast to Marxism, Wojtyła insisted on the uniqueness of every human being and that any system that subordinated the person to a system or an ideology must be inhuman. But in contrast to existentialist currents, he insisted that each human being realizes their humanity in society and in communion. He understood that God's model for humanity is provided in the Incarnation: this relating of personal philosophy to Christology, a union of philosophy and spirituality, found expression in the Council document, *Gaudium et Spes*, (para. 22), to which he had contributed and was cited at the beginning of his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979).

The Uniqueness and Dignity of the Human Person

Traditional Catholic philosophy had emphasized that the uniqueness of each human being lay in having a spiritual soul, with the faculties of intellect (understanding) and will (decision). This was what distinguished man from the animals. John Paul II's personalist philosophy focused on the uniqueness of the human **person**. His method was phenomenological, that is to say that it involved reflection on and analysis of the human person as the human person actually lives, i.e. the human person as subject and not just as object. So he emphasized the human person as responsible agent, the human person as capable of communion in love, the human person in the solidarity of society. This personalist philosophy runs right through all the teaching documents of John Paul II:

- His teaching on dialogue as the proper and respectful way for all human conversations to be conducted, a conversation that truly listens to the other with respect, a conversation that is concerned to learn as well as to give;
- His teaching on the human body as found in his weekly commentaries on the first chapters of Genesis, brought together in the book, *The Theology of the Human Body*; the human person is intrinsically a bodily being, who communicates and expresses his inner spiritual dimension through the body;
- His teaching on marriage and the family, found already in the book he wrote before becoming Pope, *Love and Responsibility*;
- His teaching on the spirituality of communion, which especially brings together the philosophical understanding of the human person in society and a totally Christ-centred spirituality.

Distinctively New Contributions

There are many areas in which John Paul II gave a distinctively new orientation or introduced a new dimension to received Catholic teaching. Some examples:

- John Paul II was the first Pope to become a kind of world evangelist. With his many journeys to all parts of the world, he did not see himself as just the top pastor going to encourage the Church in each area, but he made a priority the proclamation of the Gospel message to all who would hear. A striking innovation here has been the World Youth Days, apparently John Paul II's own idea, which have a strongly evangelistic character.
- We owe the term "New Evangelization" to John Paul II as he grasped clearly the need to preach the Gospel afresh to peoples that had once been officially Christian, but were no more.
- John Paul II may be the first Pope to have taken Scripture passages in his weekly audiences in the Vatican and worked systematically through them. In line with this, his encyclical letters often began from a meditation on biblical episodes, e. g. the teaching on morality begins with a reflection on the rich young man in the Gospels, and that on human life begins from the first chapters of Genesis.
- John Paul II introduced into official Catholic teaching the theme of **martyrdom**, a reality much on his heart from his own experience of persecution and from having known personally people who were subsequently killed for their faith. Martyrdom

is the highest expression of Christian fidelity and of love (encl. *Veritatis Splendor* on moral teaching); it is the purest witness to the dignity of the human person and the inviolability of conscience. It is very important for Christian unity because of the martyrs in all Christian traditions who all died for their fidelity to the same Lord (encl. *Ut Unum Sint*). John Paul II realized the importance for the Church of the martyrs, and he canonized several groups of martyrs (Mexico, Spain, Korea, Vietnam).

- The call to a Catholic **repentance** for the sins of the past; this was first articulated in his letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994), where he spoke of the first sins needing confessing were the sins against the unity of the body of Christ and then all sins of violence committed in the name of Christian truth. This led at the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000 to the Pope's teaching on "the healing of memories" that is the goal and fruit of this repentance. This means that as the Churches are healed of all the false and distorted memories that come from one-sided and partisan readings of history they will be able to arrive at a common recognition of what happened in all the great conflicts in Christian history, e.g. at the Protestant Reformation.
- In his encyclical on unity, *Ut Unum Sint*, John Paul II introduced a new dimension into ecumenical relations by saying the dialogue is also an examination of conscience, which means an examination of conscience by the churches engaging in dialogue (para. 34).
- In his treatment of Eastern and Western Christianity, John Paul II introduced the concept of the need for the whole body to "breathe with two lungs" comparing East and West to two lungs, both of which are needed for a healthy functioning of the Church.
- John Paul II won the trust and affection of many Jewish people, far more than any previous Pope. He strongly reaffirmed the teaching of Vatican Two on the Jewish people, spelled out the rejection of replacement teaching, especially by speaking of the "covenant never revoked" (address to German Jews in Mainz, 1980).
- In the gathering of world religious leaders for peace that John Paul II convened in Assisi in 1984, he invited them all to pray at the same time in each other's presence, but he did not - as some critics alleged - say any common prayers.
- In John Paul II's encyclical on Human Work, he examined in a new way the subjective side of work, that is how work shapes and influences the worker, a theme flowing out of his philosophy of the human person and human dignity.¹
- In John Paul II's social teaching, he developed the concept of **solidarity**, which through his influence had become the name of the trade union first formed of dockyard workers in Gdansk in 1980; for John Paul II, solidarity is the bonding together of people for common action in society. It represents each human being taking responsibility in committed cooperation with others for the common good. It is a recognition of our human interdependence in society. So solidarity is in some way the counterpart at the general human level of all people, whatever their faith or lack of it, of the concept of communion which is only truly realized between believers.

¹ *Laborem Exercens*, 1981.

Providing a Synthesis of Catholic Teaching

The life of John Paul II before his election as Pope had all prepared him to make a huge contribution to official Catholic teaching. As a summary, we can say that he produced a **synthesis** of the Church's teaching, that is an integration of all its sub-sections, thus enabling the unity and coherence of the whole to be seen. In the period between the Council of Trent (1545 - 63) and Vatican Two the different academic disciplines in the Church developed somewhat independently with the following results:

- None of the branches of theology were really rooted in Scripture. The theological battles following the Reformation led to Scripture being used in Catholic theology to provide proof texts to demonstrate Catholic truth against Protestant errors.
- Moral theology became separated from dogmatic theology and largely became a combination of training priests to hear confessions so they knew what was sin and what was not with the study of the key laws of the Church every priest needs to know.
- Spiritual theology known as ascetical theology based more on the following of Jesus was separate from dogmatic and moral theology and not properly integrated with them. It focused especially on steps in prayer and spiritual growth, together with principles of discernment concerning holiness and the supernatural or preternatural. It was generally assumed that this training was needed mainly by those from religious orders specializing in the spiritual direction of nuns (e.g. Jesuits and Carmelites especially) and was generally a minor subject or non-existing in ordinary seminary training.
- When the Church's social teaching developed from the time of Leo XIII (1878 - 1903) it was mostly based on moral philosophy/ethics and social philosophy. It was only with *Gaudium et Spes* at Vatican Two, to which Cardinal Wojtyla contributed, that it began to be grounded also in dogmatic teaching concerning God, Jesus Christ, the Church, sin and salvation.

Various elements in his previous experience prepared him to make this necessary synthesis.

- His specialist studies in philosophy and in spirituality enabled him to bring together the philosophical, the theological and the spiritual. It is clear that he achieved a personal synthesis in his own life between Scripture, Catholic doctrine and its philosophical bases, pastoral experience, involvement in society and personal life with the Lord.
- His pastoral experience as priest and bishop in the situation of combating an atheist ideology made this integration more important so as properly to fight and overcome this false system in the hearts and minds of the people (the development of the concept of solidarity is an example, as this provides a Christian alternative to the collectivity of Communism).
- His personal knowledge of Jews and the memory of Jewish friends, unique among Popes, enabled him to demonstrate to the Jews his awareness of their history of suffering and rejection.
- His personal encouragement of Fr Franciszek Blacknicki and the Oasis movement he founded in Poland (now known as Light-Life) and the experience and opportunities

of lay people under persecution coloured his teaching on the role and the dignity of all the baptized.

- His spiritual openness and pastoral attentiveness to the spiritual needs of the Catholic people led him from the start to encourage strongly the new ecclesial movements, including the Catholic charismatic renewal.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What has blessed you most personally from the life, teaching and example of John Paul II?
2. What points from this teaching are really new for you? What is their importance?
3. How can I help to bring about a real synthesis in my own life, thinking and behaviour as a Christian?