

POPE JOHN PAUL II AND THE WAY FOR THE CHURCH

THE POLISH POPE

It is estimated that two million people came from Poland to Rome for the funeral of Pope John Paul II. The Poles claimed him as their own; he was one of them. They were Catholics, stoutly, even heroically so. But they were Polish Catholics. Their history, their culture, their language, their experience, especially their experience of persecution had left a distinctive stamp on their Catholicism. To understand Pope John Paul in his teaching, one has to keep in mind that he grew up in Poland, received his education, including his education for priesthood, there, did his post-graduate studies there, served as priest and bishop there. And during virtually all his adult life before becoming Pope he had lived under a Communist regime, a situation that generated a special toughness of spirit, and an even more pronounced sense of Catholic identity.

TRADITIONAL AND FORWARD LOOKING

Anyone who grew up in Poland during the Communist regime heard less of distinctions that figured large in the minds of many Catholics in the West, those between conservatives and progressives, between traditionalists and radicals. Whether it be in the East or in the West, it seems to me that any loose use of such terms is misguided, confusing and unhelpful. At any rate, these distinctions seem to have played virtually no part in the thinking of the Pope. He held strongly, - 'strongly' is a term one easily associates with him - to the tradition. In his first encyclical he tells us where he is 'coming from'. He places himself firmly in the tradition of the Church, with the Councils, especially, of course, with Vatican II, with the popes who preceded him. His encyclicals, like those of other popes, refer you page after page to the Scriptures, to the great figures of the Early Church, to the various Councils down to our own day. So there is no question of lack of continuity.

But there is also development. You will find topics and new slants of teaching that you will not find in earlier popes. It is a case of him standing on their shoulders. He brings his own life experience and the recent experience of his people to the task of understanding the faith; he brings his own gifts which are distinctive and many. And he brings an awareness of the world of today, of the global village, the global economy, the era of instant

communication. Needless to say this has generated its own kind of problems and its own opportunities. There is the increasingly pressing question of the gap between so-called North and South; terrorism on a big scale has become a contemporary plague; the advance of the biological sciences has brought great promise, but has also set the stage for an explosion of regrettable practices in medicine and elsewhere, and corresponding to these, new moral issues. There is indeed the speedy world-wide travel and the new opportunities offered by the media of which the late Pope took good advantage. John Paul, like many others among us, had reached the mid-point of his life before Popes had to give their attention to globalization or the use of stem-cells, to in vitro fertilization or terrorism recognised as such. There was no serious doubt as to what marriage was, even when it was violated. Legislation corresponded to the moral law substantially at least in regard to the beginning and end of life. There are many powerful social trends at present that cannot but multiply the serious concerns of a Pope.

But as with other Popes, John Paul did not allow problems and problematic situations alone to determine his agenda. He went beyond them in a number of ways. In the first instance he typically sets out the Scriptural teaching relevant to a topic; he brings the immediate light of revelation to bear on it. Some of the questions such as abortion and in-vitro-fertilization need immediate and direct response. Others are less immediately evident, but potentially of great consequence. But whichever he deals with, the Pope sees beyond the problem as it presents itself to the underlying cultural situation and causes. He sees, for instance, the culture of life, promoted by the Church, over against the culture of death that seems to him so evident in the contemporary scene. People, such as the unborn and the very elderly, are not accepted as people; people are acceptable only by meeting standards set by influential elements in society; human life as such is no longer acceptable. One is reminded of what Erich Fromm, the psychologist, had in mind when he spoke of the love of dead forms, which he regarded as pathological. He thought of those who, through rigid laws or other forms of control, want to cramp and control people and deny them the freedom to expand and grow.

THE THREATS TO THE PERSON

Pope John Paul sees the human person threatened in a great variety of ways. In particular, we in the contemporary world are in danger of being enslaved by the great achievements in science and technology of which we are so proud. Let me take an example, a not unreal one. We know how the

computer has become a commonplace for anyone from three to ninety-three, how it rules and controls so much of what we do. It is intended to increase our control enormously; and it does, of course, if wisely used. It can accumulate data, organise data and draw conclusions from them. It deals in information. But information is not knowledge; that requires insight, and still less is it wisdom; that has to do with knowing what one's life is about and how to live it. So if you deal so much in computers that you begin to think as though you were a computer you do well if you are stocking the shelves of the Warehouse, but do not do so well if you have terminal cancer or are deciding on your vocation in life, and it will be of no help when it comes to saying your prayers. In other words you acquire a distorted and highly defective approach to life. You imprison yourself in a narrow and constricted world. The very language we use can be a prison. Not so long ago we took for granted that doctors had patients, lawyers had clients, and teachers had students. But now there is a tendency for all of us to simply become customers in all departments of life. Young doctors have industrial disputes and there is a sex industry. What happens when we think of teaching or giving legal advice as a business transaction? Any decent teacher or lawyer would be appalled. It is a case of us imprisoning ourselves in the language that we use. It would be the Pope's point that people will inevitably imprison themselves in some work of their own hands or minds unless they see everything in relation to God. Christians see the narrowness of their world; God is greater than their world; this is the condition of their being free. St. Francis of Assisi in recognising God as Creator and Father could receive the world as gift; in a real sense the whole world became his; it is no wonder that he is admired by environmentalists and animal-lovers.

THE RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHY

The Pope when a young priest taught philosophy in the University of Cracow. He was an expert in Phenomenology, a branch of philosophy almost ignored in much of the Anglo-Saxon world, but cultivated on the continent of Europe. For the Pope this was highly relevant to the work of the Church and of the Pope, and he used the knowledge and mental skills involved to advantage later. Phenomenology notes, analyses, and expresses with great care the structure of the conscious life of the human being. Let me take an example. Young children are credited with an ability to know whether to trust a stranger or not. This means that somehow the child knows what trust is. But the child cannot put it in words. The child cannot say that your understanding of trust is mistaken, that it is really something else. This

is of great importance in relation to many aspects of our human lives. If the human being is the way for the Church, it is vital that we know what is authentically human and what is not. In his book *Love and Responsibility* Pope John Paul sets out at length the relationship between man and woman in marriage so that the reflective person can think it through and make it their own. This was a very valuable service to married people and to the Church.

Again, most of us consider that we know pretty well what work is; we have actually done some work at least. It seems obvious that work means doing something useful and getting paid for it; beyond that one can go on to discuss the conditions of work and what wages or salary it deserves. But this does not bring out the most important aspect of work and it is not an adequate way of approaching the question for the Pope. For him there is indeed the work that is done and how this contributes to the welfare of people and deserves recompense. But there is also the effect of the work on the worker and this has priority in Pope John Paul's mind; One does not simply use human beings for a purpose, however good. The Pope is all in favour of the bread being baked and the buses being driven and the rest. But what the work entails for the worker must be checked first.

This has consequences. It is important for a person to have work. Unemployment must not be used by the Government as a device for boosting the economy. Some economists discuss what percentage of unemployment is 'normal'. And provision must be made for the handicapped and physically impaired to do the work of which they are capable, whether it suits the system or not. Even more radical, and this may not appeal to the Business Round Table, is the contention that those who work in an enterprise, management and labour, should have the primary voice in its direction; we should be moving towards a situation in which people share in the ownership and direction of the enterprise they work in. The classical version of economics treated labour as one factor alongside land and capital in any venture. It constituted another 'cost factor' which justified itself only through its marginal contribution to the profits.

THE WAY FOR THE CHURCH

The human person is the way for the Church. That is the main thrust of the Pope's teaching. But we must be careful that we do not bring God down to our own level or see him as serving our plans. It is the human person in the

full dimensions of their existence that is in question, fundamentally in relation to God in Christ, our Saviour. Christ reveals the Father; in him we are children of the Father. The Holy Spirit forms Christ in us. So through Christ we are brought into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity; In him is the fullness of divinity and of humanity. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

In Jesus then we know who we really are, what it means to be a human person, what our destiny is and how we reach it. Since the stamp of the Trinity is on us we are built for relationships, we are relational people. Each human being has a deep longing to be truly and fully human, though this may be disguised sometimes. Each of us knows in his or her heart that the way to happiness leads us to justice, freedom, truth and above all, love. The Pope says simply that there is no life that deserves to be called human without love. In every human being there is a restlessness that St. Augustine spoke of, and which will not be satisfied until we reach God.

In Christ then we find the truth of God and our own truth at once. Christ accompanies each person on the journey through life, though his presence may sometimes be hidden. The Pope has clearly in mind the account of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus on the day of Christ's Resurrection. Jesus joins them as they go along, but they do not recognise him at that stage. He asks them about what they have on their minds, takes them 'where they are at', leads them into an understanding of his own Passion, Death and Resurrection, giving them new faith and hope. As a result they go back to the embryonic Church in Jerusalem to witness to what had happened to them, and how they had recognised Jesus in the breaking of bread.

Pope John Paul stresses particularly that he is dealing not with people in general, or with something called humanity, but with each concrete, individual person on his or her journey, dealing with their situation, with their awareness of themselves, their searching, their striving, their failures and weaknesses, the whole story of their individual lives. Here it is well to remember that individual persons have, in a sense, come into their own over the last forty years or so. The Pope is speaking of the spiritual story of each person; for him the spiritual story is not a different story from the general story of their lives. It is the heart of that story and gives it its crucial meaning.

THE ECUMENICAL MISSION.

We can conclude with some reference to the ecumenical thrust of the Pope's teaching and activity. The two go together and correspond to one another. He taught ecumenism and practised ecumenism. The restoration of unity among Christians must be a primary concern of every Pope. The divisions in the ranks of the baptised constitute a glaring wound in the Church of Christ. But perhaps a more striking feature of the Pope's work was his attention to relations between the Church and non-Christian religious bodies. A major step, and one that did not have universal approval in Rome, was his hosting in Assisi of a great range of non-Christian leaders to pray, not together, but to pray at the same time. He was very conscious that the Holy Spirit is active beyond the confines of the Church; Each person is called to salvation and accepts it or rejects it. Each person is accompanied by Christ in their journey through life. The Pope's concern for the dignity of the human person provided the common ground for meeting a vast range of people concerned with human welfare.

Pope John Paul was concerned about many enormous problems facing the Church and facing the world. But he was never bogged down in the problems. He was a man of hope, of great hope. His world-wide travel and his initiatives in many fields are a testimony to this. Another sign is the great appeal he had for young people; they came in their millions to meet him. This hope runs through all his teaching. The positive and good are always emphasised. He was an old man, beset by serious health problems, when he issued his encyclical for the new millennium. And what the Americans would call the punch line in that encyclical is the instruction that Jesus gave to Peter when the latter had laboured all night in vain: Go out into the deep. And of course Peter was rewarded with a great catch of fish.

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