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John Paul II – Particular Significance and Theological Portrait

Summary

Saint Pope John Paul II was *Magnus*, which means great. For many reasons John Paul II has deserved this title: For his innovating apostolate, for his pastoral work, for his teaching too. This is an attempt to expose briefly some aspects of his magisterium and show how all his teaching was founded around the figure of Christ, as Redeemer of man.

Saint John Paul II's vision of the transcendence of human beings enlightens all aspects of his theology. The enormous commitment of Great John Paul II to the theme of human dignity is perfectly united to his theological vision of Redemption in Christ. All the points of his anthropology have a unique point of reference. It is the supernatural vocation of man and woman that gives full sense to their life, mission, and it is what supports the dignity of every human being. In fact, after Christ, each individual can only be fully understood by considering that supernatural calling and dimension. This is the only path to true salvation for all around the world.

Keywords: John Paul II, Magnus, anthropology, theology, encyclical

Streszczenie

Jan Paweł II – szczególne znaczenie i portret teologiczny

Święty Papiież Jan Paweł II był „magnus”, co oznacza wielki. Z wielu powodów Jan Paweł II zasłużył na ten tytuł: za swój nowatorski apostołat i swoją pracę duszpasterską, a także za nauczanie. Artykuł ten jest próbą krótkiego ujawnienia niektórych aspektów jego magisterium i pokazania, w jaki sposób całe jego nauczanie opierało się na osobie Chrystusa jako Odkupiciela człowieka.

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Transcendentne spojrzenie na człowieka rzuca światło na wszystkie aspekty teologii św. Jana Pawła II. Ogromne zaangażowanie Wielkiego Jana Pawła II w zagadnienie godności ludzkiej doskonale łączy się z jego teologiczną wizją odkupienia w Chrystusie. Wszystkie punkty jego antropologii mają unikalny punkt odniesienia. To nadprzyrodzone powołanie mężczyzny i kobiety nadaje pełny sens ich życiu, misji i jest tym, co wspiera godność każdego człowieka. W rzeczywistości po Chrystusie każdy człowiek może być w pełni zrozumiany tylko z uwzględnieniem nadprzyrodzonego powołania i wymiaru. To jedyna droga do zbawienia dla całego świata.

Słowa kluczowe: Jan Paweł II, magnus, antropologia, teologia, encyklika

The purpose of this point is to show why Pope John Paul II must be called Magnus, either considering the actions carried out since the beginning of his pontificate, or his words and the strength he showed saying them, together with the reaction of the people who were listening as well.

He is also Magnus for the overall vision he had about the social and human situation in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, and because his intuition about the enormous spiritual reserves that the people of those nations hid. He also saw a providential design in respect to the missionary work of the universal Church, and he showed it in his works, in the way he supported new religious congregations, and in his brilliant Magisterium.

1. Significance for Church in the Third Millenium

1.1. The reality of St. John Paul II as *Magnus*

Saint Pope John Paul II was *Magnus*, which means great. That sentence was said and repeated by many from the beginning, during and especially after the end of his extraordinary papacy of 26 and half years long.

For many reasons John Paul II has deserved this tittle of *Magnus*. Just shortly after his election to the throne of Saint Peter, they were some people, from all around the world and even far from Rome who have already perceived that reality. Let us present the case of an Argentine priest, Fr. Carlos M. Buela, who wrote these words in 1979:

This is why I make my vows before the Church, before history and before the world, so that the Pope may be called *Ioannes Paulus Magnus*. Like the young Poles, let us swear today (to him and to the church) an indestructible fidelity. Peter speaks and works by the mouth and gestures of John Paul!²

Fr. Buela became the founder of the Institute of the Incarnate Word (IVE) in 1984, a missionary institute that was highly inspired in actions and magisterium of Saint John Paul II.

On the quoted article, the young priest also wrote: “In Victory Square in Warsaw, during the vigil of Pentecost, this victory of gigantic proportions began”.³ It could be considered perhaps the greatest victory in the Church’s history, due to the fact that it was the victory over the cruellest enemy, the fiercest adversary, the most ruthless antagonist, over the most perverse power on earth, over the most diabolically totalitarian project the bi-millennial Church has had to face.

Why right there in Victory Square in Warsaw? In the researcher’s view, the triumph was not won because of the great and glorious reception afforded the then Pope by the millions of Poles (despite the efforts to prevent them from approaching him, or the “dirty moves”, as referred to by the Polish bishops); neither for the fact of having gathered “an immeasurable multitude of crowds” (estimated at 16 million in 9 days), but for the fact that, spontaneously and unanimously, they applauded the Pope for 15 minutes when he said that without Christ it is impossible to understand man.

The Polish people “keeping a profound silence”, heard the first Slavic Pope say:

To Poland the Church brought Christ, *the key to understand that great and fundamental reality that human being is. For man cannot be fully understood without Christ.*

² Article in Spanish: C. M. Buela: *Significación del viaje del Papa por Polonia*, “Revista Verbo” 21 (1979) no. 195, p. 44–53; republished in: “Diálogo” 20 (1998), p. 25–38 [official review of the Institute of the Incarnate Word in San Rafael, Argentina]. Included in: C.M. Buela: *Juan Pablo Magno*, New York 2011, p. 177–191. Translation from Spanish is ours in every case, except if the opposite is said.

³ He is referring to the first and victorious journey on Poland after John Paul II was elected as Pope on June 1979. The homily on the Victory Square took place, in fact, on June 2, 1979, on Pentecost vigil.

Or rather, man is incapable of understanding himself fully without Christ. He cannot understand who he is, nor what his true dignity is, nor what his vocation is, nor what his end is. He cannot understand any of this without Christ.

Therefore, Christ cannot be kept out of the history of man in any part of the globe, at any longitude or latitude of geography. The exclusion of Christ from the history of man is an act against man. Without Christ it is impossible to understand the history of Poland, especially the history of the people who have passed or are passing through this land. The history of the nation is above all the history of its people. And the history of each person unfolds in Jesus Christ. In him it becomes the history of salvation.

In that moment the then Pope could no longer continue. An ovation was transformed into an applause that lasted for almost a quarter of an hour.⁴

1.2. Providential relationship: why *Magnus*?

The IVE was officially founded in San Rafael of Mendoza, in Argentina, on Sunday, March 25th, 1984. According to Roman rite this day is the liturgical feast of the Annunciation and the Incarnation of the Word. Pope John Paul II, on the same day, in union with all the bishops of the world, decided to consecrate the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. It was the first time that the consecration was done with all the conditions requested by Our Lady, according to what Sister Lucia of Fatima explicitly referred years later.⁵

⁴ From the same article quoted above (cf. C.M. Buela, *Juan Pablo Magno*, op. cit., p. 180–181). The section that reports the words of John Paul II are from: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790602_polonia-varsavia.html, with modifications for the sake of inclusive language (20.02.2020). Also: Pope John Paul II, *Insegnamenti*, II/1 (1979), p. 1385–1391.

⁵ On March 25, 1984, Pope John Paul II consecrated the world in a public ceremony at St. Peter's in Rome; the consecration was in the form of a 'whole-world consecration' that included the participation of the Catholic bishops throughout the world. Cardinal Bertone reported that Lucia dos Santos had said that the consecration requested by the Virgin Mary had been fulfilled and accepted in Heaven (cf. M. Miravalle, *Introduction to Mary: The Heart of Marian Doctrine and Devotion*, Goleta US 1993, p. 171–172, quoting Fr. Robert J. Fox, *Documents of Fatima & the memories of Sister Lucia*, Fatima 2002, p. 122). In former attempts, Pope Pius XII in October 1942 performed the consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary for

This providential fact is not the only point of contact between the mentioned institute and Pope John Paul II. It was instead the first from a long series, coming the new points of contact under various forms: The inspiration and guidance that the Institute took from his extensive magisterium, from his actions, from his triumphal journeys, from his singular initiatives, especially those regarding the family and young people.

Years later, deeply admired by the reaction of the people before and during the funeral that followed Pope John Paul II' death, the aforementioned researcher wrote again explaining with more precision why should JP II should be considered *Magnus*:

He was great in the way he accepted and coped with his illness. He was a great communicator, as remembered Elio Toaff, former chief rabbi of Rome.⁶ "John Paul II has been defined as the first 'TV pope' in history: with his smile and his gaze he knew how to reach the human heart", said Krzysztof Zanussi, a Polish film director.⁷

He was great because of the energy of his work, because of the missionary dimension he wanted to give to his pontificate preaching personally the Gospel in hundreds of countries. He was great for his strong defence of the vocation and holiness of the family and the dignity of all human life from conception until natural death. He was great because he never diluted the 'truth' in false compromising formulas but proclaimed it in all its splendour (...) He was great for his elevated and universal magisterium.

He was great because he worked tirelessly in order to win for Christ those who are the future of humanity and the future of the Church. He was great because he was the Lord's effective instrument for through his example thousands of young people decided to "leave everything to follow Christ" (cf. Mt 19:27). He was great because he affirmed the primacy of the spiritual, for the goods that do not pass away. He was great for having contributed directly to the fall of communism: It can now be said that everything that happened in Eastern Europe would not have been so without the presence of this Pope. He was great because he taught the Church to breath with its two lungs: stressing the importance of the Church's Eastern and Western traditions. He was great because he placed Jesus Christ at the centre of his life. He was great because he embraced the Cross of Christ which gives life to whatever it touches.

the entire world, and in July 1952 he specifically consecrated the peoples of Russia (in the apostolic letter *Sacro Vergente*).

⁶ Quoted by *El Pontificado de Juan Pablo II*, ed. A. Izquierdo, Roma 2006, p. 46.

⁷ Quoted by M. Descotte, *El legado de Juan Pablo II*, Mendoza 2005, p. 152.

Divine Providence wanted to be born as a Religious Family under the Pontificate of Pope John Paul the Great, who after Peter, bearer of the first fruits of the Holy Spirit, is probably the greatest pontiff the Church has known in its 2000 years of existence. In his person the Lord wanted to donate a “father for our Religious Family” (*Directory of vocation of IVE*, 78). It can be listened again the words that invite people to open their souls to Jesus Christ, to do great things for God, “so as not to escape the missionary adventure and at the same time move many others toward it” (*Directory of Spirituality*, 216).⁸

In addition to this last aspect of the relationship of JP II with the new Institute founded, Fr. Buela completed his view saying: “He is not a ‘decorative element of the legislation’ but instead animates the fundamental aspects of the charism”.⁹ JP II was finally named as father and patron of the religious family of the Institute of the Incarnate Word by decree of the then General Superior, Fr. Carlos M. Walker, on February 20th, 2012:

He effectively exercised *paternity* during his pontificate in an explicit and verifiable manner over the Institute [...]. For this reason, it can be considered as *blessed protector* because of his special paternal relationship.¹⁰

2. Aspects of his Theological Portrait

2.1. Introduction

Speaking of “theological aspects” of Pope John Paul II could seem a laughable or even a superfluous expression. The reason being not because John Paul II was not a theologian but because his entire pontificate was impregnated with theology. Neither does it mean to say that he neglected his task as Shepherd of the entire Church by spending his time in theological speculations and disquisitions. Of course, he was a Shepherd in the strictest sense of the word, but even in his preaching, in his gestures, in his silences, he was transmitting the truth of God to the

⁸ Cf. C. Buela, *Juan Pablo Magno*, op. cit., p. 587–599.

⁹ Cf. C. Buela, *Juan Pablo Magno*, op. cit., p. 517.

¹⁰ *Circular letter* from the general superior (20.02.2012), after John Paul II was beatified by pope Benedict XVI.

human being, especially the truth of Christ. This is Christian theology in its very strictest sense, a theology which is lived and incarnated.

It will be not possibly to expand and develop all the themes which John Paul II theologically discussed. Even developing deeply only one of them would require a doctoral thesis and not a short article such as this. The intention of this paper is to briefly present some specific and limited points of his thought, beginning with what should be considered as the core of his message, the prospective of man under the light of Jesus Christ the Redeemer, as can be deduced from the basic lines drawn in his first and pro-grammatical encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*.

2.2. Christological anthropology

Anthropology occupies a very important place in John Paul II's theology, not because of casual or arbitrary reasoning, but because, based on good thinkers and doctors of the Church, he understood deeply the influence of the man called Jesus Christ upon every man and woman in history. Jesus was the only one who establishes the true bridge, the real connection between God and His creation, between the divine world and the human world. Therefore, Christology is so central to John Paul II's thought, and it illuminates other aspects of his wide theological thought as well.

The act of redemption marked the high point of the history of man within God's loving plan. God entered the history of humanity and, as a man, became an actor in that history, one of the thousands of millions of human beings but at the same time Unique! Through the Incarnation God gave human life the dimension that he intended man to have from his first beginning; he has granted that dimension definitively, in the way peculiar to him alone, according with his eternal love and mercy and with the full freedom of God; he has granted it also with the bounty that enables us, in front of the original sin and the whole history of the sins of humanity, and considering the errors of the human intellect, will and heart, to repeat with amazement the words of the Sacred Liturgy: "O happy fault... which gained us so great a Redeemer!"¹¹

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Redemptor Hominis* (4.03.1979), 1: AAS 71 (1979), p. 258.

As one can easily appreciate, for John Paul II it is through the Incarnation that man was fully restored to the dignity that God willed for him from the beginning. Nevertheless, there is still place for this question: What is man's original dignity?

The dignity of woman and man is rooted in the fact of being created according to "the image and likeness of God", and in this point John Paul II's thought finds itself in perfect harmony with that of the Second Vatican Council (its inspiration), summarised here by the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, (quoted by him many times in his teaching) especially number 22:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light (...) Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear (...) Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man.¹²

The affirmation presented above supposes that without the revelation of Christ it is impossible to fully understand man (and woman, of course).¹³ Rather this very revelation is the deepest source of wisdom regarding man, his nature and his destiny. This revelation assures us that

man is created in the image of God, is called to a goal that is God himself, and implies that man, who is the only creature on earth that God has willed for himself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself, because all men are called to the same goal. That implies also a certain likeness between the union with the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity.¹⁴

Therefore, in Christ human nature has been raised to a dignity which has no equal.

¹² Vatican Council II [SVatC], Pastoral Constitution (on the church in the modern world) *Gaudium et Spes* (7.12.1965), 22: AAS 58 (1966), 1042. Quoted in *Redemptor Hominis*, 8: AAS 71 (1979), p. 271: "Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare".

¹³ We do not consider necessary to clarify at every time concepts that should be understood as evident ones.

¹⁴ Cf. SVatC, *Gaudium et Spes*, 24: AAS 58 (1966), p. 1045.

Through this Revelation, the Incarnate Christ is penetrated “in a unique and unrepeatable way, into the mystery of man and entered his *heart*”. But he goes further, in stressing that he is not referring to man abstractly, but rather to the ‘concrete and historical’ human being: “For, by his Incarnation, he, the son of God, *in a certain way united himself with each man.*”¹⁵ This concern for the ‘single and concrete’ human being has probably its roots in the *personalism* that characterised the philosophy (especially the anthropology) of Karol Wojtyła from the years of his teaching at the Catholic University of Lublin, but it was later enriched by catholic Thomism and by the later development of the Magisterium, especially the Second Vatican Council, to which the already auxiliary bishop Wojtyła contributed decisively.

The anthropological view of John Paul II was further deepened during his papacy. Nearly twenty years after the *Redemptor Hominis*, he wrote the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, where the foundation of his anthropology reveals itself to be profoundly Christocentric in every respect, because: “Revelation introduces into our *history a universal and ultimate truth* which stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort.”¹⁶ Being this truth “*an absolute one*, it summons human beings to be open to the transcendent, whilst respecting both their autonomy as creatures and their freedom: *You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free* (Jn 8:32).”¹⁷

As this *transcendence* of the human being is absolute and universal, it will set his dignity to a unique place among all other creatures, a place that cannot be ignored. But if this dignity is not totally denied, it is however jeopardised by systems of thought that close themselves to the truth, that is, closed to the essence of things and to their being:

It has happened therefore that reason, rather than voicing the human orientation towards truth, has wilted under the weight of so much knowledge and little by little has lost the capacity to lift its gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the *truth of being*. Abandoning the investigation of *being*, modern philosophical research has concentrated instead upon human knowing. Rather than make use of the human capacity to know the truth, modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned (...) This has given rise

¹⁵ Cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, 8.

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* (14.09.1998), 14: AAS 91 (1999), p. 17.

¹⁷ Cf. *Fides et Ratio*, 15: AAS 91 (1999), p. 17.

to different forms of agnosticism and relativism which have led philosophical research to lose its way in the shifting sands of widespread scepticism. Recent times have seen the rise to prominence of various doctrines which tend to devalue even the truths which had been judged certain.¹⁸

This is the reason why Pope John Paul II would defend the dignity of human being absolutely and without discussion in other areas as well, such as human acts, human life, family and marriage, promotion of women, interreligious dialogue, human work and other social issues, trying to recover and apply the certain truths of human nature that Christian revelation has made clear, and Tradition has always kept.

2.3. Human acts and their morality. Moral conscience

a) Human acts and conscience: Moral law

For the human being the ‘truth of being’ manifests itself in his very nature, and in the way this nature operates through concrete acts. John Paul II made this very clear since the earliest years of his pontificate, in his catechesis about human conscience, a series of instructions that followed the other one related to the human body:

What is the goodness of human behaviour? If we pay attention to our daily experiences, we will see that, among the various acts which we perform, some are performed by us, but they are not fully ours, while others are not only performed by us, but they are also *fully ours acts*. They are those that are born from our free will: acts of which each of us is *author* in the truest sense. In a word, they are *free acts*. (Through these), human person *expresses itself* and at the same time *realises itself*. That is why each one *is responsible for himself*.¹⁹

According to Revelation, the works that God expects of human behaviour are the ‘good works’: *We are God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus for the good works which God has already designated to make up our way of life* (Eph 2:10). That is why human beings realise themselves

¹⁸ Cf. *Fides et Ratio*, 5: AAS 91 (1999), p. 9.

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II, General audience (7.20.1983). Text online available only in Spanish, Italian and Portuguese: (http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/audiences/1983/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19830720.html) (13.02.2020).

only by performing these kinds of works. John Paul II emphasises this relation between good works and human nature: “When the act performed freely is *in conformity* with the person’s nature, it is good. It is necessary to underline this fundamental relationship between the act performed and *the person performing it*”. That is why, “moral evil is precisely the evil of the person *as such*; moral good is the good of the person *as such*.”²⁰

The natural consequence of what has been said is the following: There exists a *moral law* which is natural and interior to man, but at the same time external to him. We find this very well attested in numerous parts of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, issued during John Paul’s pontificate: “The moral law is the work of divine Wisdom” [1950]; “it presupposes the rational order, established among creatures for their good and to serve their final end, by the power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator” [1951]; “it finds its fullness and its unity in Christ” [1953]. The human being accesses to this law judging with his conscience, which is called, in this respect, the *moral conscience*:

Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognises the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to *follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right*. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man *perceives and recognises* the prescriptions of the *divine law*.²¹

The doctrine of moral conscience will later be fully developed in one of John Paul II’s masterpieces, his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*:

Conscience thus formulates *moral obligation* in the light of the natural law: it is the obligation to do what the individual, through the workings of his conscience, *knows to be a good he is called to do here and now*.²²

²⁰ Cf. John Paul II, General audience (7.20.1983), op. cit.

²¹ From: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Burn & Oates, London 92007 (1 ed: 1994). Numbers of catechism on brackets (1778).

²² Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor* (6.08.1993), 59: AAS 85 (1993), p. 1180.

Even when necessary for men to do good and avoid evil, conscience is never completely autonomous in order to determine what is good and what is evil:

Conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil. Rather there is profoundly imprinted upon it a principle of obedience vis-à-vis *the objective norm* which establishes and conditions the correspondence of its decisions with the commands and prohibitions which are at the basis of human behaviour.²³

This last affirmation is an exact quotation from his previous encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem* (*Lord and Giver of life*: regarding the Holy Spirit), and its roots are found in the doctrine on conscience from the Second Vatican Council.²⁴ Conscience becomes *the proximate norm of personal morality*, because its voice derives from the *truth* about moral good and evil, which it is called to listen to and to express. This truth is indicated by the “divine law”, *the universal and objective norm of morality*. The judgment of conscience does not establish the law; rather it bears witness to the authority of the natural law and of the practical reason with reference to the supreme good.²⁵

If a universal and objective norm exists, it will imply that there are some actions which have their own morality independent from the intention of the individual performing them. John Paul II declared:

These are the acts which, in the Church’s moral tradition, have been termed ‘intrinsically evil’ (*intrinsece malum*): they are such *always and per se*, in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances. Consequently, without in the least denying the influence on morality exercised by circumstances and especially by intentions, the Church teaches that “there exist acts which *per se* and in themselves, independently of circumstances, are always seriously wrong by reason of their object.”²⁶

²³ Cf. *Veritatis Splendor* (6.8.1993), 60: AAS 85 (1993), p. 1181.

²⁴ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Dominum et Vivificantem* (18.05.1986), 43: AAS 78 (1986), p. 859; cf. SVatC, *Gaudium et Spes*, 16; Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae* (7.12.1965), 3: AAS 58 (1966), p. 1037 and p. 931.

²⁵ Cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 60.

²⁶ Cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 80: AAS 85 (1993), p. 1197. The last sentence is quoted from the post synodal exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (2.12.1984), 17: AAS 77 (1985), p. 219–223.

Man is responsible for these acts, if committed consciously and willingly.²⁷ This is exactly the opposite to the teachings of moral theories such as: *consequentialism* and *proportionalism*. “*The teleological ethical theories (proportionalism, consequentialism)*, while acknowledging that moral values are indicated by reason and by Revelation, maintain that it is never possible to formulate an absolute prohibition of particular kinds of behaviour which would be in conflict, in every circumstance and in every culture, with those values.” According to them, the acting subject will be responsible for attaining these values but in two ways: Some of them in a *moral order* (love of neighbour, justice, etc.), some in a *pre-moral order* (advantages or disadvantages regarding physical integrity, use of goods, life, death, etc.). In a world where goodness is always mixed with evil, and every good effect linked to other evil effects, the morality of an act would be judged in two different ways: its moral ‘goodness’ would be judged on the basis of the subject’s intention in reference to moral goods, and its ‘rightness’ on the basis of a consideration of its foreseeable effects or consequences and of their proportion. Consequently, concrete kinds of behaviour could be described as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, without it being thereby possible to judge as morally ‘good’ or ‘bad’ the will of the person choosing them.²⁸ These positions, inspired by the nominalism of Ockham, developed in the utilitarianism of Bentham and Stuart Mill, and sustained by authors such as Marciano Vidal, Bernard Häring, Charles Curran and others, are discarded.

b) Erroneous conscience and ideal pursued

Human conscience may be erroneous if it refuses to adapt itself to the supreme rule of truth:

Conscience, as the judgment of an act, is not exempt from the possibility of error. As the Council puts it, “not infrequently conscience can be mistaken as a result

Pope Paul VI had already said that was far from the Council to teach that things considered evil before were now permitted. Italics and emphasizing is ours in this case.

²⁷ The same in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Freedom makes man responsible for his acts to the extent that they are voluntary”, 1734; “Every act directly willed is imputable to its author”, 1736.

²⁸ Cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 75: AAS 85 (1993), p. 1194.

of invincible ignorance, although it does not on that account forfeit its dignity; but this cannot be said when a man shows little concern for seeking what is true and good, and conscience gradually becomes almost blind from being accustomed to sin” (GS, 16). In these brief words the Council sums up the doctrine which the Church down the centuries has developed about the *erroneous conscience*. Certainly, in order to have a ‘good conscience’ (1 Tim 1:5), man must seek the truth and must make judgments in accordance with that same truth. As the Apostle Paul says, the conscience must be ‘confirmed by the Holy Spirit’ (cf. Rom 9:1); it must be clear (2 Tim 1:3); it must not ‘practice cunning and tamper with God’s word’, but ‘openly state the truth’ (cf. 2 Cor 4:2). On the other hand, the Apostle also warns Christians: *Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect* (Rom 12:2).²⁹

The doctrines regarding the good and evil of human acts, and regarding human conscience, are both rooted in the “*perennial philosophy of being*”, well known to John Paul II, and in the Christian mysteries of the fall and Redemption. It is a fact that human race fell because of sin, but that it is really redeemed and rescued in Christ. Thus, the mystery of the Incarnation mirrors the situation that man lives today. If redeemed, even with difficulty, the human person can choose and put into practice the true good that the divine law proposes to its conscience. Christ and Church teaching is not only an impossible ideal:

It would be a very serious error to conclude... that the Church’s teaching is essentially only an ‘ideal’ which must then be adapted, proportioned, graduated to the so-called concrete possibilities of man, according to a ‘balancing of the goods in question’. But what are the ‘concrete possibilities of man’? And of *which* man are we speaking? Of man *dominated* by lust or of man *redeemed* by Christ? This is what is at stake: the *reality* of Christ’s redemption. *Christ has redeemed us!* This means that he has given us the possibility of realizing *the entire* truth of our being; he has set our freedom free from the *domination* of concupiscence.³⁰

Christian doctrine is what most agrees with human nature and leads the human being to the truth and realisation of his being, his goal. That goal is not just a vague ideal, but a concrete one and possible to reach, even if sometimes it can be difficult.

²⁹ Cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 62: AAS 85 (1993), p. 1182.

³⁰ Cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 103: AAS 85 (1993), p. 1214.

2.4. Life, family and human development

The dignity of man based on the reality of being created in the image and likeness of God and restored by the work of the Redemption in Christ was one of the great themes of John Paul's papacy. He returns again and again to it in his magisterial writings, such as in the encyclicals *Centesimus Annus* (1991), *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), and *Evangelium Vitae* (1995). It is also possible to find important considerations about human dignity in relation to love and family even before those documents were written, as can be seen in *Love and Responsibility*, a book written by the then bishop Wojtyla in 1960 (in Polish) and translated into English in 1981,³¹ but also in the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981): "God created man in His own image and likeness: calling him to existence through love, He called him at the same time for love. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being."³² Love is not considered here as a spontaneous sensible affection towards another. It is to will the good of the other, and to give oneself to them in an unselfish way because the perfection of love requires self-giving. He repeated the same concept in his letter to the youth of the world.³³ And he insisted in complementary concepts when he refers to the dignity of woman, to whom he not only assigns equal dignity of man as human being, but even a special and particular role in human history.³⁴

Family is also the first social environment in which humans learn to exercise the gift of self-giving:

The very experience of communion and sharing that should characterise the family's daily life represents its first and fundamental contribution to society. The

³¹ Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*; San Francisco 1993 (1st edition 1981).

³² Pope John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22.11.1981), 11: AAS 74 (1982), p. 91–92.

³³ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Dilecti Amici* (31.03.1985), 14: AAS 77 (1985), p. 626–628.

³⁴ "It is desired to give thanks to the Most Holy Trinity for the 'mystery of woman' and for every woman-for all that constitutes the eternal measure of her feminine dignity, for the 'great works of God', which throughout human history have been accomplished in and through her" (cf. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Mulieres Dignitatem* (15.08.1988), 31: AAS 80 (1988), p. 1727).

relationships between the members of the family community are inspired and guided by the law of 'free giving' (...) This free giving takes the form of heartfelt acceptance, encounter and dialogue, disinterested availability, generous service and deep solidarity. Thus, the fostering of authentic and mature communion between persons within the family is the first and irreplaceable school of social life, and example and stimulus for the broader community relationships marked by respect, justice, dialogue and love.³⁵

Regarding the theme of human development, there are two key elements that will help man to reach his final end: The vocation to "dominate the earth" and the priority of *being* over *having*. In his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II uses these principles in relation to human work:

Within the context of man as the subject of work, it is now appropriate to touch upon certain problems that *more closely define the dignity of human work*, to make it possible to characterize more fully its specific moral value. In doing this it must be always kept in mind the biblical calling to 'subdue the earth', in which is expressed the will of the Creator that work should enable man to achieve that dominion in the visible world, and through work man *not only transforms nature*, adapting it to his own needs, but he also *achieves fulfilment* as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes 'more a human being'.³⁶

This is, of course, strictly related to the dignity of man as such: "*The primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject (...). Each sort (of work) is judged above all by the measure of the dignity of the subject of work, the person, the individual who carries it out*".³⁷ All these should be performed with a spirit of *solidarity*. For John Paul II, "solidarity is undoubtedly a *Christian* virtue (...) In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the *specifically Christian* dimension of total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation."³⁸

³⁵ Cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 43: AAS 74 (1982), p. 134.

³⁶ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Laborem Exercens* (14.08.1981), 9: AAS 74 (1982), p. 598. Regarding the expression 'subdue the earth', reflects the exact meaning of the imperative Hebrew *kibshuhā* (*kabash* root) in Gen 1:28. That is not in collision with any true and healthy ecological concern, an area in which also John Paul II excelled, as demonstrated – between others – in his *Message for the celebration of the world day of peace of Jan 1 1990* (8.12.1989), AAS 82 (1990), p. 147–156.

³⁷ Cf. *Laborem Exercens*, 6: AAS 74 (1982), p. 591.

³⁸ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 40: AAS 80 (1988), p. 568.

John Paul insists repeatedly on the dignity of man as a basis for every human process:

Nor would a type of development which did not respect and promote human rights – personal and social, economic and political, including the rights of nations and of peoples – be really worthy of man.³⁹

Conclusion

As it has been said, it is simply not possible to present the full richness of the theology of Pope John Paul II, not even the richness of his anthropology, limited here to only some elements.

The enormous commitment of this great Pope to the theme of human dignity is perfectly united to his theological vision of Redemption in Christ. In such a way, all points of his anthropology have a unique point of reference. For example, it is seen how he presents the dignity of human life as something rooted since the very beginning:

Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase.⁴⁰

It is the supernatural vocation of man that enlightens and gives full sense to his life, to his mission, and it is what supports his dignity. In fact, after Christ, man can only be fully understood by considering his supernatural calling and dimension. This is the only path to true salvation for all the world.

That was the conviction of this holy Pontiff, a heritage given to Christians, that should be placed in Mary's heart, to whom John Paul II consecrated his entire pontificate, with the words "Totus tuus, Maria!"

³⁹ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 33: AAS 80 (1988), p. 557.

⁴⁰ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae*, 9: AAS 87 (1995), p. 402.

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