



Dariusz Karłowicz (ed.),  
*Thinking with St. John Paul II:*  
*JP2 Lectures 2020/2021*  
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*Thinking with St. John Paul II* compiles a series of monthly lectures given at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas-Angelicum in Rome by outstanding intellectuals from Europe and the United States. Sponsored by the St. John Paul II Institute of Culture, the lectures provide analysis and reflection on a wide range of topics in the light of St. John Paul II’s intellectual and spiritual legacy. Dariusz Karłowicz introduces the notion of “thinking with St. John Paul II.” He explains that the work of John Paul II is not and should be considered “closed” but rather as a “calling.” We have received a rich heritage from the great Polish Pope/saint—shall we bury this talent in the ground or increase its value? Karłowicz, president of the St. Nicolas Foundation, asks us to consider how we can continue his work and not waste this heritage. More research by scholars is needed, of course, to better understand his achievements. But this work cannot be left “only to historians,” he urges, once we realize that Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II was above all a “witness to Christ, as a thinker, artist, spiritual guide, an expert on and critic of modernity, an advisor and still-living source of ever relevant inspiration” (xi–xii). Thus, the purpose of these lectures, as the Institute (founded in 2020) to “reflect upon the most important problems of the contemporary Church and the world—a place where we will not only think about St. John Paul II but also *with* him.”

Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi provided the inaugural lecture on the topic of “Why Christianity Needs Culture.” To answer this question, he provides

a sweeping account of the various meanings and dimensions of culture, the importance of culture in the work and documents of Vatican II (mentioned no less than ninety-one times), some key references to culture in John Paul II, and the historic development of the encounter of the gospel and culture. Amid such complexity of the questions about culture, Cardinal Ravasi identifies the two main reasons that the Church needs culture, the first being the task to achieve “inculturation” throughout the diverse times and places of the human world. He references the “apostles to the Slavs,” Cyril and Methodius, and of course John Paul II’s brilliant but little read encyclical by the same name, *Slavorum Apostoli* [1985]. Christianity is incarnational and therefore cultural in reception and expression. Second, the Church must practice “interculturality” in our global and ecumenic age through encounter, dialogue, and “cultural spiritual exchange.” Cardinal Ravasi here refers us to John Paul II’s speech at the United Nations (5 October 1995)—the Pope emphasized commonality in so far as “every culture is an effort to ponder the mystery of the world and of the human person: it is a way of giving expression to the transcendent dimension of human life. The heart of every culture is its approach to the greatest of all mysteries: the mystery of God” (2). In this light, the diversity of cultures and religions offers the challenge of mutual respect and affirmation of freedom of conscience and expression but also the promise of mutual enrichment. After answering the question of culture, he then discusses the challenges of our contemporary scene and the changes in the very paradigm of culture. He mentions the erosion of cultural and spiritual identities through the “fragility and liquidity” of cultural expression and the emphasis upon youthful concerns and the primacy of emotion. Contemporary culture proposes “linear accumulation as opposed to a deepening.” The culture is characterized by frustration and distrust of future, consumerism, and narcissism. There is an overall priority given to the instrumental over meaning/ends. Nevertheless, he urges not mere denunciation, nor retreat into “sacred oases of nostalgia and an idealized past” (10). But we must seek such opportunities as found in solidarity, volunteerism, authenticity, universalism, yearning for freedom, victory over disease, and progress of science. Finally, Cardinal Ravasi offers some thoughts about two critical cultural issues of our time, science and communication. The study of DNA and neurology make possible interventions in human phenotype and offer the prospect of a trans- and posthumanism. So the very dynamisms of human nature and unique products of human beings such as cognition, culture, and art are now open to a radical change or possible reduction. As for the infosphere, the Cardinal sees the need to build upon the work of Marshall McLuhan and highlight the critical issues of various claims to authority, truth, and regulation through the Internet and social media. Cardinal Ravasi concludes his sweeping and energetic lecture on culture with a sanguine note through a quotation from Apple founder, Steven Jobs: “Technology is not enough. It’s technology married with the lib-

eral arts, married with the humanities, that yields the results that make our heart sing” (18).

Three of the lectures stand out as excellent examples of combining an exposition of the texts of John Paul II with ethical, political, and theological issues of our time. Philosopher John Finnis, in “John Paul II and the Foundation of Ethics,” examines *Redemptor hominis*, *Laborem exercens*, and *Veritatis splendor* as well as *Person and Act*. He shows how John Paul II uses both faith and reason to make evident fundamental principles of ethical life. In doing so, John Paul II draws upon St. Paul, Augustine, and Aquinas. The encyclicals mentioned develop and deepen the key insights and arguments of *Person and Act*. The method, derived from Aristotle, looking first to the human act and its object, and then discovering capacities, habits and ultimately the supposit or person as the author, is served well by the Schelerian attention to the world of value. Finnis is interested in the relationship between “choices, acts, ways of life, and ‘selves,’ that is persons as self-determining and self-shaping by choice” (23–24). This central theme of *Person and Act* is brought to light through the phenomenon of work in *Laborem exercens*. By using his methodology of Aristotle and a Husserl inspired attention to subjective reception and constitution of meaning John Paul II articulates the two aspects of work, the importance of which sides with the immanent or fulfillment of as a human being as good or bad. Finnis’s masterful scholarship is careful, extensive, and illuminating about the human person and work. He then similarly provides analysis of *Redemptor hominis* and *Veritatis splendor* to deepen this theme of self-actualization through moral choice formed by conscience and moral truthfulness. Finnis shows us how to patiently work through the text, indeed the thought of John Paul II, to discover the dignity and the transcendent destiny of the human person and to better understand why moral choice and its normative formation makes all the difference in the world.

Theologian John Cavadini, in “Pope John Paul II, the Second Vatican Council, and the Crisis of Modernity,” does a masterful job in unfolding the teaching found in *Gaudium et spes* and other texts about the goodness and temptations of the modern aspirations for freedom, community, and mastery of nature. The crisis of modernity, according to *Gaudium et spes*, is the great contradiction between the promise of mastery, freedom and temporal achievement, and the persistent experience of evil and death in the human world, in each person and society. It is a crisis of truth and conscience. It is a crisis that leads to Christ as the Redeemer of Man. This teaching is brought to a near perfect pitch in John Paul II’s encyclical *Gospel of Life*. It is through the redeeming action of the cross through sacramental life that a culture of life and can overcome the culture of death. Cavadini rightly looks to EV §25 as the core theological truth: “Precisely by contemplating the precious blood of Christ, the sign of his self-giving love (cf. Jn 13:1), the believer learns to recognize and appreciate the almost divine

dignity of every human being” (106). He then turns to the passages in *Veritatis splendor* to connect the unconditioned respect for the dignity of each person reflected in the existence of universally binding character of negative moral norms and the sacrifice of the martyr for truth and right (89–90). The admiration for the heroic witness surmounts cultural barriers. Cavadini thus concludes that “John Paul II appears as a faithful and brilliantly creative interpreter of the dialogical imperative of Vatican II (114). As a third case we consider the lecture by theologian François Daguét OP, “Political Theology from St. Thomas Aquinas to John Paul II and Benedict XVI,” in which he argues that John Paul II and Benedict XVI have brought to completion a centuries long task to clarify the meaning of “political theology” and to clarify the nature, basis, and manner of the cooperation between the Church and the political society (including its state apparatus). The wrongful use of this term by German philosopher and apologist for National Socialism Carl Schmidt as “the justification of a given political order by theological means” (116) has warped the endeavor to develop a theology of politics. Rightly understood it is simply the theological account of communal life in its complexity and natural goodness. Fr. Daguét argues that Augustine lacked the philosophical instruments to tackle such a project, however fruitful his spiritual analysis of the two cities. Aquinas, drawing upon Aristotle’s empirical-historical political science identified two fundamental principles of political life: the political order is finalized by a moral good, itself controlled by a divine good; and the Church and the city, on different levels, are empowered to cooperate (121–123). The Church is a “leavening agent within societies which are temporal in nature” (122). Aquinas anticipates the “laic” account of the temporal society by affirming a relative autonomy within its sphere (which does not include salvation of souls, hence a reason by which the Church may rightfully intervene through the indirect power championed by Bellarmine). The French Revolution “crippled Catholic doctrine, both that of the Pontifical Magisterium and that of theologians” (126). The Church then became aware that it “had no useful conceptual instrument” to deal with the new political situation (126). Against this radical secularity Catholics could only postulate the “immediate submission” of the political community to the supernatural order (127). It was Pope Leo XIII who began the task of rethinking the idea of political community, now an “irreversible change.” His rejuvenation of Thomism at last provided the “useful instrument to deal with politics in the new context of contemporary liberal societies” (127). While acknowledging the important work of Jacques Maritain, Fr. Daguét argues that at Vatican II the Church began to lay the foundation for an authentic notion of “laicity” and expounded the proper role for the laity to participate in the affairs of the temporal society. But Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI brought this teaching to an explicit articulation of its full meaning. It is perhaps best summarized by the statement that “Man cannot be sundered from God, nor politics from morality” [Pope John Paul II in *Motu*

Proprio proclaiming Saint Thomas More, Patron of Statesmen and Politicians, October 31, 2000. 1: AAS 93 (2001), 76. See Cardinal Ratzinger, “Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life” November 21, 2002]. Now fully aware of the “res publica” and the role of the Church in fostering morality and the life of grace in the population, theologians must become better aware of this authentic political theology and work to develop it more fully and apply it more precisely.

Another group of lectures makes clear the importance of the Polish Pope, considering Ratzinger’s claim that Karol Wojtyła was providential because of Poland’s special place in the center Europe’s cultural geography as well as its historical commitments to tolerance and civic freedom. Dariusz Gawin, in “The Phenomenon of Solidarity: 1980–1981,” provides an important interpretation of the solidarity movement in terms of the recovery of civic responsibility. By their mutual recognition of each other as Polish citizens the members of Solidarity recovered a sense of “res publica.” Gawin argues that Solidarity was initially not a political pressure group, not even a religious phenomenon at its high point, but rather a newly discovered political association based upon “equal respect binding everyone without exception.” Gdańsk shipyard became a mini-polis and its activities and attitudes stood in stark contrast with the empty claims of socialist society and its mere lip service to human rights. It included Catholics and non-Catholics, believers and those of no faith. Catholic religion inspired the moral consciences of many and the sacramental life deepened the courage and resolve of those who availed themselves of its benefits. Marek A. Cichocki, in “European Identity: North and South, East and West—The Main Dividing Lines,” provides a tremendously insightful analysis of the spiritual geography of Europe noting both its east/west axis as well as its north/south axis. He explains how the east/west tension, although primarily political, was implicitly cultural and even religious. But the emphasis upon the cold war divisions obscured and even hid the more historical and vital north-south axis drawing in Rome and Mediterranean culture to the northern cultures, extending through the very origin and foundation of medieval Europe. This neglect of the south-west axis has allowed the ideology of the French Revolution to define Europe and its political tasks in terms of an exclusive, uniform, and oppressive secularity. Cichocki offers a brilliant interpretation of John Paul II’s initial words to the multitude at St. Peter’s Square: “He was called from a distant country, but always so close because of communion in the Catholic faith and tradition” (74). The author then explains how the north/south connections established commonality and closeness whereas the east/west divide established distance. He claims that the French dominance of European identity has radicalized its hostile stance to Christian culture” and “strengthened its quest for transgression and justifying it” (93). In “Formal Europe and Vital Europe. Tradition as the Ground of Identity” Renato Cristin covers a similar theme but identifying the vital dimension of

European identity in terms of particularity and national culture. This dichotomy between “formal, legal and institutional Europe” and a vital Europe “reflecting tradition and common history.” He says that Europe has replaced “the sense of being European with the pragmatics of administration” (183). Institutional supranationalism will come to cancel national sovereignties. John Paul II spoke with some regularity about the future of Europe and the importance of national culture as the true source of sovereignty, not economic and political interest (UNESCO, 1980).

The last group of lectures speak about the crisis of our time and possibilities for renewal as inspired by John Paul II. Chantal Delsol, in “The End of Christendom,” reminds us of the devastations wrought by the French Revolution and the destruction of Christian not only as a political force, but at all levels of social and cultural life. Archbishop Rowan Williams, in “Faith in the Modern Areopagus,” considers how we may derive a lesson from St. Paul in our approach to evangelization. He takes up the work of Rene Girard and proposes the notion that a non-violent approach to social relations, namely a refusal to scape goat those who appear different may help lead to Jesus Christ.

Rémi Brague, in “The Place and Relevance of Art in the Modern World,” puts forward a very helpful historical thesis that whereas the Greek world pursued beauty without art (emphasizing instead the beauty of the soul), and the late modern times pursues art without beauty (emphasizing instead that which is “interesting” to the subject), it is Christianity that seeks to join art and the beautiful. Because Jesus makes visible the invisible God, representation of a person, in both icon and historical narrative, is justified. Modern art has followed the Islamic style of the arabesque, praised alike by Gogol, Poe, and Baudelaire. The most important feature of modern art is its capacity to elicit a reaction of the viewer, listener, reader: “Art is yoked to subjectivity” (166). So, the art must be shocking in some way, and the artist’s personality becomes more decisive than the work itself. In the end, Brague argues, “art can’t possibly be a window opening on transcendence,” because it is without purpose and has no relation to what is good (170). His constructive proposal is quite startling—he suggests that artists find a measure of humility and use their art as an instrument of revelation. But most startling is his recommendation to put aside Dostoevsky’s “hackneyed expression” that beauty will save the world and let us rather rediscover the true and the good as the primary transcendental properties of being. Here he takes a position counter to Solzhenitsyn (Nobel Speech) and claims that beauty alone will disappear, unless put at the disposal of the true and the good. But for this theoretical and practical task we need philosophers and saints rather than artists. And Brague exclaims: “We have been blessed to witness these two categories combined in extraordinary ways in one person, Pope John Paul II” (175). This is a fitting end to an article that sums up the whole collection and the whole project. This is an extraordinarily significant book; it is a hopeful

sign that the new St. John Paul II Institute will continue to develop the rich legacy of the Polish Pope in Rome, a city in which some of late have forgotten the memory and neglected the work of the Polish saint and philosopher, Pope John Paul II.

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