

John Paul II and the Twentieth-Century Popes

by Ron Walden

Despite an eight-day media blitz, John Paul II leaves America as something of a mystery. He is surely an attractive figure, especially by papal standards. He sings, skis, walks like a linebacker and has trouble keeping his skullcap on straight. Yet, for many Americans who listened to what he said, he remains an enigma. He pleased progressives in and out of Roman Catholicism by attacking the values of bourgeois capitalism, but identified with conservatives within his church by stating bluntly in Philadelphia and Chicago that he opposed ordaining women and married men, expected priests to be unwaveringly loyal to the hierarchy and adamantly rejected not only abortion and divorce, but even birth control.

To penetrate the apparent contradictions in John Paul II requires an intellectual journey to the contexts that formed Karol Wojtyła's character: currents within contemporary European thought and the mainstream of twentieth-century Catholicism. First, we

shall look at John Paul's intellectual training and the school of European philosophy with which he has identified professionally. Then, we will review some aspects of the history of Roman popes during our century, with special attention to their developing positions on church renewal and issues of peace and justice.

John Paul II is a scholar of some stature. Unlike other popes, he has served on the steering committees of learned societies, published extensive technical treatises and supervised doctoral dissertations. And although John Paul I, the short-lived "September pope" with the smile, had been a professor, he taught in a typical little Italian seminary, whereas his namesake's university career has brought him into the mainstream of modern secular intellectual life. What can we learn from John Paul II's publications in the field of philosophy and theology that might illuminate his outlook on the world and his purposes as pope?

As a philosopher, the present pope is a phenomenologist. When it is used as a technical term in philosophy, "phenomenology" means more than just a purely descriptive study of some subject matter. It denotes rather a particular school of continental phil-

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osophy and that school's methodology. The central and most influential figure in the phenomenological movement was Edmund Husserl, a German Jew who began his career as a mathematician but quickly moved on to philosophical issues, which he wrote about with a passionate intensity and at great length until he died, amid the gathering shadows of the Third Reich, in 1938. One of Husserl's important early collaborators was a Roman Catholic sociologist, Max Scheler, who published a major work on ethics in Husserl's journal. Scheler is the writer whom the pope quotes most warmly in his philosophical writings.

We can make some educated guesses about why the pope has found aspects of phenomenology appealing. Phenomenology claims to be an analysis of human consciousness, and as such, it makes continual appeal to concrete human experience. That is, in opposition to the rigid deductive approach taken by some Catholic philosophers, John Paul's philosophical school tries to think with constant reference to experience and without the prejudices of a preconceived theoretical formulation. Yet, phenomenology is not out-and-out empiricism. It does operate with the conviction that there is such a thing as human consciousness there to be analyzed. For that reason, the pope has obviously found it an attractive alternative to a thoroughgoing materialism or to certain forms of linguistic philosophy, which he seems to find less easily compatible with the Christian doctrine of man.

For him, the most distinctive and valuable aspect of a human being, — that which makes a human being a person, — is not rationality itself, but action. His longest and most original book, *The Acting Person*, is devoted to an analysis of the conscious human act and its structure and parts. The *actus humanus* was also a concern of Thomas Aquinas, but John Paul's approach to it is very unlike that of classical thomistic philosophy. His insistence that it is in action alone that the wholeness and distinctive individuality of a person emerge often sounds more like existentialism. Human life comes first, in all

its active particularity, and only then comes talk of its structures or "essential" patterns.

Of course, John Paul is too good a Catholic thinker to deny the essential rationality of human being, and here he decisively parts company with the existentialists. He believes that human action always has a rational aspect which tempers its quality of raw decision, but that reason itself does not constitute the particularity of the individual person. Rather, it is the concrete human act, which synthesizes motion, emotion and intention, that makes a person who he or she is.

Because it is personal, a human act has value of itself; even before it is brought into relation with rules or norms, it is a moral event. "The performance itself of the action by a person is a value," Cardinal Wojtyla wrote. This radical union of ethics and ontology sharply rules out legalism. Its implications in practice are hard to avoid: If a human act has value in itself, that value must be protected from external coercion. People must therefore be free to act as they see fit, or fundamental human dignity is injured.

It should be no surprise, then, that Pope John Paul II has been a consistent champion of religious liberty. As archbishop of Cracow, of course, he was untiring in his challenges to the government's restrictions on his church's freedom. But he also knows that freedom works both ways, that the church may not claim it for herself without offering it to others. One of his most memorable speeches at the Vatican Council was an eloquent defense of the principle that religious freedom must be extended to all, even to those in error, even to atheists.

In sum, John Paul's philosophical positions show extraordinary respect for the unique concreteness of each human situation and for the nobility of each person's groping, even mistaken, actions of self-definition. The details of his phenomenology of human life and of "acting" by "persons" will, of course, be subject to criticism, just as every philosopher's proposals are. The point to notice here is twofold: For the first time in centuries, the pope of Rome has an independent, coherent, technically competent philosophy of his own and, moreover, that philosophy suggests or

accommodates certain clear choices in theology and church policy as well.

In John Paul's theology, the result of his unremitting attention as a philosopher to the concrete human situation is a corresponding emphasis of the Christian doctrine of man. He continually approaches the central Christian mysteries by developing a synthesis of traditional and contemporary teachings about human experience. In his first encyclical, "Redemptor hominis," issued last

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March, he wrote, "We penetrate by means of the continually and rapidly increasing experience of the human family into the mystery of Jesus Christ." He then explicitly says that even in the secular realm, God's redemptive grace is at work, simply because human beings are there:

Against a background of the ever-increasing historical processes, which seem at the present time to have results especially within the spheres of various systems, ideological concepts of the world and regimes, Jesus Christ becomes, in a way, newly present, in spite of all his apparent absences, in spite of all the limitations of the presence and of the institutional activity of the Church. Jesus Christ becomes present with the power of the truth and the love that are expressed in him with unique unrepeatable fullness.

... what is in question here is man in all his truth, in his full magnitude. We are not dealing with the "abstract" man, but the real, "concrete," "historical" man. We are dealing with "each" man, for each one is included in the mystery of Redemption and with each one Christ has united himself forever through this mystery.

A companion emphasis, discernible in the last sentence of this quotation, is the one the pope places on the incarnation. Because God became a man in Jesus Christ, "the Church cannot abandon man, for his 'destiny,' that is to say, his election, calling, birth and death, salvation or perdition, is so closely and unbreakably linked with Christ." And a bit later the pope adds:

Man in the full truth of his existence, of his personal being and also of his community and social being. . . this man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission. . . . because man — every man without any exception whatever — has been redeemed by Christ, and because with man — with each man without any exception whatever — Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it.

When John Paul attempts as a philosopher to be an honest listener to the voices of concrete, active human beings, and when as a theologian he emphasizes the humanity of God and the consequent worthiness of all humanity, he does not thereby offer a new ecclesiastical program for the Catholic Church. What does set him apart is that he has his own independently forged intellectual framework to accommodate the church's teaching. The search for Pope John Paul II inevitably leads to an examination of the teachings of his predecessors.

It is important at the outset that the history of the papacy not be identified with the history of the Roman Catholic religion. The office of pope is only one among many offices in the church. If one thinks for a moment about what individual Catholics do, and what parishes and schools, dioceses and national churches, and orders of monks and nuns actually do, it is faintly ludicrous to regard the Catholic church as simply an intricate extension of the pope's person and powers. Hence, to trace the course of twentieth-century papal history is to trace but a part of twentieth-century Catholic history; the preoccupations of the popes have been only some of the concerns of the church at large.

From Pius IX to John XXIII there were

five popes: the vigorous and subtle Leo XII, the saintly and pastoral Pius X, whose spirit was crushed by the onset of World War I; the skillful diplomat, Benedict XV, who guided the church during the war; Pius XI, pope between the wars; and Pius XII, an elegant and austere man whose caution on speaking out on issues of social justice gave way to militant anticommunism in the 1950s. All of these men faced variations of two main problems — renewal of the church and international relations, including the political issues of peace and justice.

During our century, the self-definition of the church has been at the heart of internal renewal. It began at the end of World War I and rallied at first around the slogan of “the Mystical Body of Christ.” Biblical scholars contributed importantly to the discussion.* It is hard now to realize how profound in its implications was the shift from political metaphors to biblical images. Before our century, the Catholic Church had typically defined itself by analogy to a monarchical state, arguing that it, too, had a right to hierarchical government, to earthly sovereignty, and even to police powers and the means of coercion. By contrast, the “Corpus-Christi-mysticum” movement emphasized that the church was not just “visible and palpable, like the Roman people, or the Kingdom of France, or the Republic of the Venetians,” as the great seventeenth-century Jesuit Robert Bellarmine had claimed, but that it had a mysterious, com-

munal, even invisible side as well, which was better brought out by the biblical metaphor of the Body of Christ. The phrase seemed richer, more vital, less juridical, more accommodating of the genuine Christianity of non-Catholics, and freer of stifling clericalism than earlier ways of speaking of the church.

But the shift clearly made the curia and some of the popes uneasy. If people start emphasizing the living, affectively rich relations of Christians among themselves and with Christ, as the phrase “body of Christ” encourages them to do, they may easily turn away from a forbidding churchly institution and resist the authority of its officers. The tension between mystical body and visible church may become so great that the connections between them disappear. It was that danger which Pius XII meant to forestall by issuing perhaps the greatest of his encyclicals, “*Mystici corporis*,” in 1943. The pope placed his blessing on the movement and had words of high praise for the new vocabulary, but he sought to remove the threat it offered to the ecclesiastical institution by simply equating the mystical Body of Christ with the (presumably visible) Roman Catholic Church. In one bold stroke, he had turned a progressive slogan into a conservative one.

The role of the church in international affairs goes back at least to what came to be known as the “Roman Question.” Put simply, the issue concerned the pope’s right to temporal sovereignty over the Patrimony of Saint Peter, some rather extensive territory in central Italy which the papacy ruled at least nominally from the eighth century until 1870. It was beyond dispute the most important international issue on the papal agenda for the 50 years thereafter. Pius IX contributed to making the question intractable. He had been a foe of European political liberalism since it had temporarily exiled him from Rome during the revolutions of 1848, and he bitterly resisted the generation-long campaign to unify the Italian peninsula under a liberal monarch. In 1870, the liberals took Rome at long last and Pius retreated into the

*The modern biblical movement began among Catholics during the so-called “Modernist” crisis of the turn of the century. Its popular side has consistently been supported by the popes, who have encouraged private Bible reading by the laity and supported such modern translations into the vernacular as the English Confraternity Bible and Mgr. Ronald Knox’s version. Scholars have not fared as well. Many of the Modernist positions condemned by the Holy Office in 1907 bore on the church’s use of scripture and on the concept of revelation, and the upshot of the crisis was that Catholic exegetes were more subject than ever to the detailed control of the churchly teaching office. But the biblical scholars kept plugging away during the dark years between the wars, their work enriching the movements for the renewal of the liturgy and the doctrine of the church, and finally in 1943 they were rewarded by an epoch-making encyclical of Pius XII, which cautiously affirmed “the freedom of scientific investigation in biblical matters” and serves as the *Magna Carta* of modern Catholic biblical studies.

Vatican palace, condemning anyone associated with the new Italian kingdom.

Under Pius' successor, Leo XIII, and even more under the twentieth-century popes, the church transformed its struggle for the political right to temporal sovereignty into a spiritual battle for independence from all political authority. The church needed a toehold of territory, the new argument went, not so that it could be one kingdom among others, but so that it could be independent from all earthly kingdoms. From the point of view of the church's mission, the loss of the Papal States was an inestimable gain. By the 1920s, the pope himself was ready to recognize that. The Lateran Treaty of 1929 and its accompanying Concordat confirmed the independence of the church by guaranteeing the extraterritoriality and nominal sovereignty of the Vatican and satisfied the Italian state by acknowledging that the former papal domains were part of a unified, secular Italy with its capital at Rome.

At last, in spite of themselves, the popes were set free from worldly concerns to become worldwide pastors. Since World War I, they may have suffered from theological shortsightedness, and they may have temporized badly on some ecclesiastical issues, but they have provided clear and consistent advocacy of morality in international affairs. Benedict XV had been a quiet but very effective supporter of the Wilsonian principles on which the League of Nations was founded. The correspondent for *The New York Times* wrote after his death that he

was undoubtedly possessed by the belief that the thing he was ordained to do in a world of war was to make peace. He had carefully refrained during the war from any action that might weaken his claim to be the arbitrator of conflicts. He passed no judgments on the belligerents except those protests against incontrovertible outrages like the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the bombing of churches, the slaughter of non-combatants. But he realized that the consequences of the war were more devastating than the war itself, and that a military peace was a kind of cosmic sarcasm so long as there was neither economic nor social peace.

In general, this was the program that all the popes followed through Pius XII: Quiet diplomacy behind the scenes rather than confrontations; ceaseless encouragement of peaceful solutions to international disputes; effective support for the institutions of international law; continued insistence that true peace must be based on social and economic justice.

And anticommunism. When, from time to time, the pope found himself allied with a figure or movement which later history has shown to be villainous, the mistake was almost always due to anticommunism. Most of the Vatican's unfortunate involvement in Italian politics, for example, stems from its hostility to the Italian Communist Party. Pius XII offered tacit — and Pius XI open — support to Mussolini because he was an alternative to the Communists. Since the war, the church has consistently supported the Christian Democrats, even when their governments have been weak and corrupt. Nothing seems to make the Vatican forget the advantages of the Concordat so quickly as a Communist gain at the polls; then, suddenly, the papacy again begins to act like an Italian Renaissance principality.

The Italian scene, though, is one example of a general rule about Catholic involvement in twentieth-century politics: The church has a very spotty record on the local and national level, while internationally it has been fairly consistent in its support of justice for the poor and international peace. Catholic bishops and clergy have often taken sides with their nation's lords of violence and oppression (one remembers the miters and croziers near Franco, and Cardinal Spellman in Vietnam), but Catholics can be justly proud of the international leadership of recent popes. With regard to poverty resulting from the inequities of capitalism, there is a succession of courageous papal documents.* Pope Paul's eloquent United Nations speech

*These begin with Leo XIII's "Rerum novarum" and run through Pius XI's "Quadragesimo anno" to Paul VI's brilliant "Populorum progressio." And with respect to war, Pope John's "Pacem in terris."

stands in line with 75 years of papal peacemaking.

The Second Vatican Council was known for “turning the church around” on the issues of church renewal, as well as peace and justice. Yet, as we have just seen, the Council’s positions on all these matters had important precedents. Vatican II was epoch-making not because it created new progressive doctrines

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out of thin air, but because it selected trends from an ambiguously rich and varied past and put an official stamp of approval on them.

The Council’s central achievement was to reformulate the church’s vision of its own nature and mission. By the time Vatican II opened in 1961, Catholic progressives had found a new slogan to supplement the “Mystical Body of Christ” in their theories of the church. It was another biblical image, this time found in the Old Testament’s “Pilgrim People of God.” At a critical moment during the Council, Pope John XXIII dramatically interrupted the proceedings in order to insure that this new vision of the church would prevail. When official Catholic theology highlights the people of the church instead of its institutional structures, then a profound shift of emphasis has taken place. A “Copernican revolution” has occurred. That is just what happened at Vatican II.

With the aid of Pope John XXIII, the progressive majority of bishops at the Council rewrote the Catholic doctrine of the church. They decisively subordinated the older, defensive emphasis on the church’s changelessness and rigid institutional perfection (guaranteed by a privileged clergy and especially the pope), to a new emphasis on a

people, gathered by God’s providence to undertake an often stumbling pilgrimage through time, equipped with certain gifts and services. Among these services, or “ministries,” are the priesthood, the episcopacy and the papacy. But these offices exist for the sake of the people, and not the other way around. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church the chapter on the people of God comes first, and the chapter on the structure of the churches comes afterwards.

In the Council’s other masterpiece, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, a corollary shift of emphasis occurs. Here, not only does the hierarchy exist for the sake of God’s people and not the reverse, but also the church itself exists for the sake of the world, and not the reverse. Just as the clergy serves the church instead of commanding it, so, too, the church serves the world instead of commanding it. These profound changes in Catholicism’s definition of itself and its mission were not unprecedented. We have seen how nearly a century of papal history had prepared for the second Vatican Council.

Against this historical background, John Paul II has no surprises to offer. The majority of cardinals wanted to elect a whole-hearted supporter of Vatican II, and they got one. The new pope agrees with his immediate predecessors. Like Pope John and Pope Paul, he is somewhat anticapitalist on social issues, though anti-Marxist as well. In the spirit of Vatican II, he appears eager to find new, more collegial patterns of governing the church. But in matters of sexuality (married priests, ordination of women, birth control, abortion, homosexuality), issues the Council did not treat in detail, he takes the traditional line, just as John and Paul did. His speech to the bishops in Chicago left no doubt about that. On the issues, he offers nothing new.

Yet, John Paul II’s accession to the See of Saint Peter and his actions since then have stirred an excitement that not even John XXIII evoked. “John Paul, Superstar!” screams *Time* magazine. Why? I think it is due to two matters of style: The pope is Polish, and he is young.

Both of these facts are more serious than they seem at first, and both of them bear a relation to the increasingly international character of the Catholic Church. The Christian church has always claimed to be "catholic," that is, worldwide. But only since the nineteenth century has Christianity become truly universal. And only since the pontificate of John XXIII has that universality become evident in the governance of the Roman Catholic Church. When all the world's bishops assembled in St. Peter's for the Vatican Council in 1961, it was a shock to notice how few of them were Italians and how many of them were not even white! Of all the accomplishments of Pope John's successor, Paul VI, perhaps the most decisive was his internationalization of the College of Cardinals. The conclaves that elected John Paul I and John Paul II were comprised almost entirely of Paul's appointees; and they were the first in over half a millennium not to be dominated by Italians, and the first since classical times to be so influenced by non-Europeans. In the lifetime of most of the readers of this journal, the Roman Catholic Church has become genuinely internationalized.

Just as the election of a Pole represents internationalization, the youthfulness of John Paul is a sign of its recent date. It is as if the Cardinals wanted to acknowledge that the world had recently become a "global village," thoroughly international and unified, with a premium on youth and vigor. For them, John Paul's style has significance.

Of course, the "global village" is brought

together by what the Vatican quaintly calls "the instruments of social communication," that is, the media. And John Paul is a media star, the first pope truly to understand television. Pope Paul never realized that if you speak of your "great joy" but your face is pinched, the television will mercilessly show your grimace, not your joy. John Paul, on the other hand, is a natural on television. He can work the crowds, intone a slogan and exploit a symbol with the skill of a Kennedy. On his American tour, he deftly chose the holy places of the American civil religion and the archtypical centers of American ethnic groups and made just the right remark, just the appropriate gesture, at each. He shrewdly saved his hard words for the end of his tour, after the television and newspapers had made him beloved.

We have said that all this amounts to a difference of style, not of substance. John Paul II has said nothing that his three immediate predecessors have not said. But this pope has personal qualities and media skills that do set him apart from all other popes. He therefore has, and can increase, a large fund of goodwill from masses of people. He has the self-possession and intelligence to know how he wants to spend that support. In the modern world, a difference of style is a difference of substance. The substantial style of John Paul II will undoubtedly continue to attract worldwide attention. After observing his American tour, it can safely be predicted that Pope John Paul II intends his enormous appeal to draw people in the direction set by his twentieth century predecessors.

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