

The Intellectual Legacy of Pope St. John Paul II

GEORGE WEIGEL

Ideas have consequences. Pope St. John Paul II was a man of consequential ideas who left a vast body of teaching that the Church and the world will be digesting for centuries. Virtually all the great issues of his time – and more than a few important issues of the past and future – were addressed in John Paul’s encyclicals, apostolic letters, apostolic exhortations, and public addresses. Choosing the highlights in such a staggering mass of material is, inevitably, an exercise in personal judgment; but perhaps most analysts would agree on the following as the teaching texts of John Paul II likely to have the most enduring impact, intellectually or pastorally:

His inaugural encyclical in 1979, *Redemptor Hominis* [The Redeemer of Man], was the first papal encyclical ever devoted to Christian anthropology – to explaining the Christian view of the human person biblically, philosophically, and theologically. *Redemptor Hominis* also provided the “program notes,” the template, for the entire pontificate. As such, and in its own right as an exploration what it means to be a human being in full, it will be read with interest long into the future.

Dives in Misericordia [Rich in Mercy], the 1980 encyclical on God the Father inspired in part by St. Faustina Kowalska and her visions of the divine mercy, was the second panel of John Paul’s trinitarian triptych of encyclicals, which he completed with the dense and challenging 1986 letter on the holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem* [Lord and Giver of Life]. Both made original contributions to Catholic thought, and *Dives in Misericordia* established God’s mercy as a central theme in the Church’s proposal to the world.

John Paul’s inaugural social encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* [On Human Work], was the first encyclical in the tradition of papal social teaching to reflect its author’s own experiences of manual labor, and the first to look to a poet, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, as a theological inspiration. Together, the Pope’s experiences and the poet’s reflections led to a rich portrait of the working person, in which work was understood, not as a punishment for original sin, but as humanity’s participation in God’s ongoing creativity. The Pope’s third social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus* [The Hundredth Year], was written in 1991 for the centenary of Leo XIII’s groundbreaking *Rerum Novarum* [New Things], which inaugurated modern Catholic social doctrine. *Centesimus Annus* offered a penetrating analysis of the free and virtuous society in its three component parts – democratic political community, free economy, vibrant public moral culture – and emphasized the crucial importance of a culture of responsibility and solidarity to democracy and the market. The encyclical also took Catholic social thought far beyond quixotic quests for a “third way” that was somehow neither socialist nor capitalist. *Evangelium Vitae*, the 1995 encyclical on “The Gospel of Life,” is not usually understood as a social encyclical, but could well be read that way: its insistence on the inviolability of innocent human life, and its authoritative rejection of abortion and euthanasia, identified crucial moral issues in themselves, and for the free and virtuous society.

Redemptoris Missio [The Mission of the Redeemer], was largely ignored at its 1991 publication because *Centesimus Annus*, which dealt with topics of greater interest to the world media (like politics and economics), was issued shortly afterwards. That is a shame, for *Redemptoris Missio* was one of John Paul’s most consequential documents, with its description of the Church as being a mission rather than just having a mission, and its identification of the Areopagi, the Mars Hills, of contemporary culture as fertile fields for evangelization.

Ut Unum Sint [That They May Be One], the 1995 encyclical on Christian unity (and the first encyclical ever devoted to that topic), was intended to invigorate the ecumenical movement in the twenty-first century. Irrespective of whether it succeeded in that task, it was notable for calling ecumenism back to its original focus on a common creed, baptism, Eucharist, and ministry, a goal that was getting lost in the late twentieth century.

Then there were John Paul’s two encyclicals on the intellectual life. *Veritatis Splendor* [The Splendor of Truth], was the Pope’s 1993 effort to reform Catholic moral theology by re-grounding it in what philosophers and theologians refer to as “virtue ethics.” The encyclical’s insistence that there are certain things that are always and everywhere wrong, regardless of intentions or circumstances, also provided a welcome reference point in a world given more and more to moral judgments based on mere utility, or even the abdication of moral judgment in radical moral relativism. In that sense, *Veritatis Splendor* was also John Paul II’s last commentary on (and condemnation of) the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century, which had demonstrated that, if there is no such thing as the truth (especially about the human person), then anything goes – and what goes, literally, are the weak, the vulnerable, the “other.” Similarly, *Fides et Ratio* [Faith and Reason], issued in 1998, will be read long into the future as a robust defense of the human capacity to know the truth of things, even if we can never know the truth of things completely. Two and a half centuries after the French Enlightenment dismissed the Church in the name of reason, it was the Catholic Church that defended the capacities and prerogatives of reason. Voltaire must have been spinning in his grave; but then Voltaire (despite his friendly correspondence with the eighteenth-century humanist pope, Benedict XIV) never imagined a pope quite like John Paul II.

If John Paul’s encyclicals frequently addressed issues on the world’s agenda (and created vigorous public debates in the process), the apostolic exhortations he wrote to complete the work of several world Synods of bishops were aimed at completing the Second Vatican Council’s reform of the internal life of the Church. Thus *Christifideles Laici* [Christ’s Faithful Lay People, issued in 1988] was a charter for the lay apostolate in the world, as *Pastores Dabo Vobis* [I Will Give You Shepherds, 1992] established norms for the reform of Catholic seminaries, and *Vita Consecrata* [The Consecrated Life, 1996] set standards for the reform of religious communities of men and women. *Familiaris Consortio* [The Community of the

- Family, 1981], defended the centrality of family life in human civilization, a central theme of John Paul II's preaching around the globe.

The Pope's personality – his theological and philosophical personality, and his pastoral personality – shown readily through his apostolic letters. *Salvifici Doloris* [Redemptive Suffering], was issued in 1984, six weeks after the Pope met his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, in Agca's Roman prison cell. Suffering, the Pope taught, summoned forth aspects of our humanity that would otherwise remain dormant; suffering built communities of friendship and solidarity that might otherwise remain unbuilt; above all, suffering conformed the Christian to Christ in a special way. Coming from a man who knew what it was to suffer, physically and spiritually, it was a powerful message to a world that typically regarded suffering as an absurdity or a problem to be solved technologically – even by euthanizing the suffering. *Mulieris Dignitatem* [The Dignity of Women, 1988] was the first formal exercise in John Paul II's papal feminism and will be discussed and debated for a very long time.

Perhaps the most lyrical of John Paul's teaching documents were the two apostolic letters that served as bookends for the Great Jubilee of 2000. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* [The Coming Third Millennium, 1994], proposed that the Incarnation of the Son of God was the revelation of true humanism and thus an axial moment of universal significance: here, in Jesus of Nazareth (who is both Son of God, and son of Mary) eternity entered into time and the truth about time came into focus – time is not tedious chronology, but adventure and drama. Those who grasped that could prepare a new springtime of the human spirit. *Novo Millennio Ineunte* [Entering the New Millennium], was signed on January 6, 2001, to conclude the Great Jubilee. There, John Paul II issued a biblically charged challenge to the Church to “put out into the deep” (Luke 5.5) of a new evangelization. And in one of the most revealing personal passages in his magisterium, the Pope wrote of standing at the window of the papal apartment, watching the endless lines of crowds queued up to walk through the Holy Door during the Great Jubilee; every one of those faces, the Pope noted, reflected some aspect of the face of Christ, who had died so that each of those pilgrims might have eternal life.

John Paul II made one of his most original contributions to Catholic thought and to world culture in a series of general audience addresses between September 1979 and November 1984. Together, these 129 texts are the most coherent and compelling Christian response to the sexual revolution ever articulated. Known now as John Paul's *Theology of the Body*, their re-reading of the great themes of Christian life (including the nature of God himself) through a deep reflection on our human embodiedness as male and female is already reshaping Catholic pastoral practice, in marriage-preparation and counseling. It also seems likely to help give Catholic theology as a whole a more sacramental cast of mind in the decades ahead, with nuptial giving and receptivity reminding the Church of the many other ordinary realities of life that become extraordinary vehicles of grace. Taken with the seriousness it deserves, the *Theology of the Body* can also be read in an ecumenical and inter-religious light, as yet another facet of John Paul's comprehensive response to the crisis of secularist humanism.

Thus, in the second volume of this innovative theology, *Blessed Are the Pure of Heart*, the Pope proposed that the self-giving and receptivity of male and female in

sexual love makes visible the built-in moral structure of the human person: the law of the gift, or self-giving, as the path to human flourishing. Many secular humanisms imagine human beings to be endlessly plastic and malleable; yet that leads, ultimately, to the manipulation of the human for purposes of power. A truer humanism, the Pope argued, recognizes that certain truths are built into the human condition; that those truths are unveiled by a serious reflection on what it means to be sexual beings, created male and female; and that human flourishing, and genuine freedom, requires us to live out those truths, rather than ignore them as impositions from some outsider authority.

At the beginning of the pontificate, the world – and a lot of Catholics – thought the Church had nothing interesting or relevant to say about human sexuality. The Pope's teaching that sexual love within the bond of faithful and fruitful marriage is an icon of the interior life of God, a striking assertion made in the *Theology of the Body*, reversed the polarities. Now, the Catholic Church could say to the promoters of the sexual revolution, “You think of sex as another sport. We think of sex as a revelation of the deepest truths about the human and the divine. Who takes sex more seriously?”

Because the Church and the world will be wrestling with the thought of John Paul II for centuries, his magisterium constitutes what may be the most consequential and influential body of papal teaching in modern times – and perhaps in the entire second millennium of Christian history. His thought was not without its tensions and ambiguities, and the debate over John Paul II's way of doing theology will continue. John Paul's distinctive philosophical personalism – his intense focus on the human person as the starting point for serious reflection on just about any topic – cast new light on ancient questions ranging from sexual morality to the nature of our encounter with Christ the Lord. Christian personalism also shaped the Pope's approach to ecumenism and to the Catholic-Jewish dialogue, as it bent his thinking about politics, economics, culture, and education in a distinctive direction that gave new energy to perennial truths and led to fresh intellectual discoveries. Even during the pontificate, though, questions were raised about the suitability of the personalist approach to issues involving state power (like the just war tradition or the death penalty) and the last things (including the question of the Last Judgment and the possibility of eternal damnation). The debate seems likely to be a vigorous one, which will itself extend the intellectual legacy of John Paul II far into the future.

The nature of Pope St. John Paul II's greatness can be measured in several ways, including his impact on world politics, unprecedented for a pope since the High Middle Ages. As the years after John Paul II lengthen, though, it seems to me that his greatness has even more to do with his penetrating analysis of the human condition in our time. Those insights grew out of his rock-solid faith, which gave him a remarkable capacity to “read” the world through a biblical lens; his intense intellectual life, through which he understood what he had seen; and his extensive pastoral experience, which helped him grasp the effects of what he had seen and heard in people's daily lives. The salience of those insights has increased over time. At his centenary, they shed considerable light on the discontents of the world and the challenges facing the Catholic Church in this third decade of the twenty-first century.