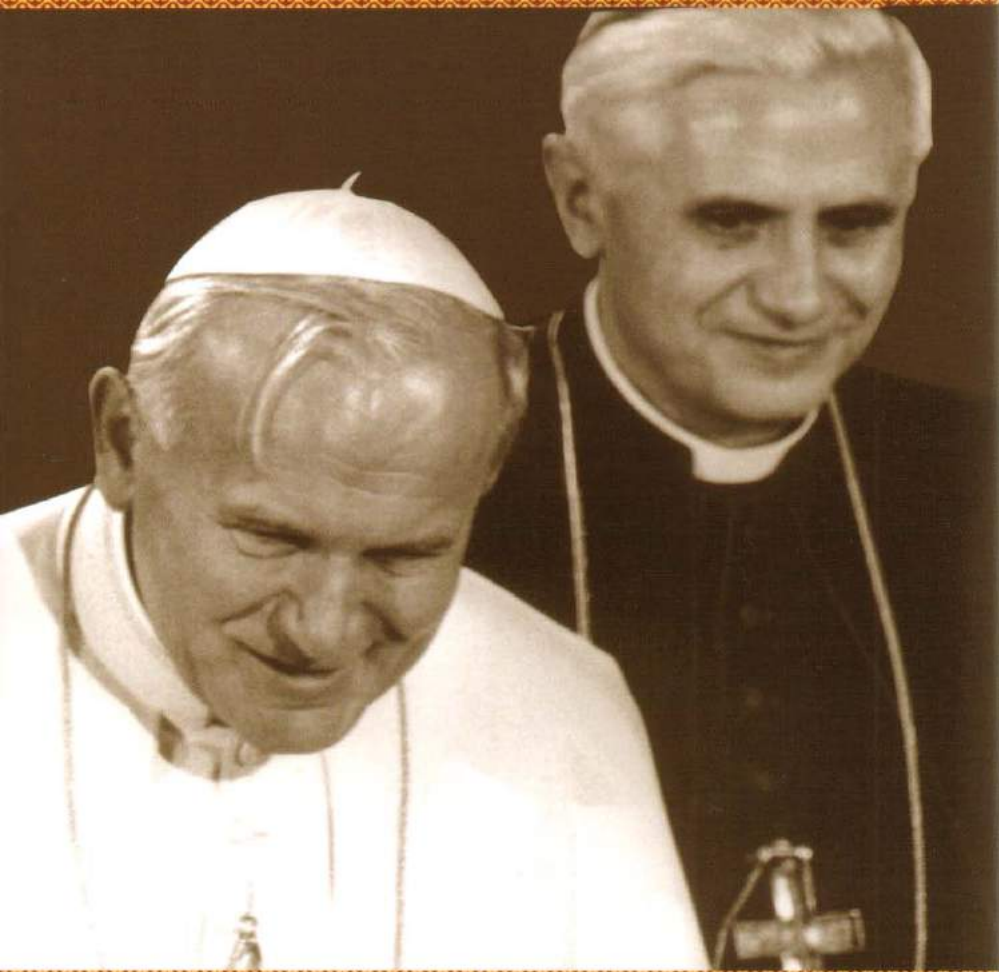


"A small treasure of a book...." — John L. Allen, Jr.



JOHN PAUL II

MY BELOVED PREDECESSOR

JOSEPH RATZINGER
BENEDICT XVI

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Edited by Elio Guerriero
Foreword by John L. Allen, Jr.



CHAPTER I

John Paul II: Unity of Mission and Person



TWENTY YEARS OF HISTORY

As pope for twenty years, he [Pope John Paul II] has undoubtedly met personally with more people from all over the world than anyone else. There are countless people whose hands he has shaken, with whom he has spoken, with whom he has prayed, and whom he has blessed.

If his lofty office can create distance, his personal magnetism instead creates closeness. Even simple, poor, uneducated people do not get the impression that he is above them, unreachable, or intimidating—the feelings that so often strike those who find themselves in the antechambers of the powerful. And then,

when one has personal contact with him, it is as if he is an old acquaintance, as if one were speaking with a family member or friend. The title "Father" (Papa)² no longer seems a title, but the expression of the real relationship one truly feels in his presence.

Everyone knows John Paul II: his face, his distinctive way of moving and speaking; his immersion in prayer, his spontaneous joy. Some of his words have engraved themselves indelibly on our memories, beginning with the passionate appeal that he issued at the beginning of his pontificate: "Throw wide open the doors to Christ, do not be afraid of him!" Or these words: "Life cannot be a trial run; love cannot be a trial run!" An entire pontificate is condensed in words like these. It is as if he wanted to open pathways to Christ all over, as if he wanted to make accessible to all the entryway to true life, to true love.

If, like Paul, he is found constantly and untiringly on a journey "to the ends of the earth," if he wants to be near to all and to lose no opportunity to proclaim the Good News, it is not for promotional reasons or out of a thirst for popularity, but because in him are realized the Apostle's words: "The love of Christ urges us on" (2 Cor 5:14). Being near him, one realizes that he cares about people because he cares about God.

One gets to know John Paul II best by concelebrating Mass with him, by letting oneself be drawn

into the intense silence of his prayer, more than by analyzing his books or speeches. By participating in his prayer, one moves beyond words and into his very being. Continued reflection in this vein helps one to understand why, although he is a great intellectual with his own significant voice in the modern world's cultural dialogue, he has also maintained a simplicity that permits him to communicate with every single person.

There is another element of this great capacity for inclusion that distinguishes the Polish pope: his having exchanged the classical "we" of the pontifical style for the personal and immediate "I" of the writer and orator. Such a stylistic revolution should not be underestimated. At first glance it may seem the obvious elimination of an antiquated usage no longer applicable in our time. But one must not forget that this "we" was not a mere formula of rhetorical courtesy.

When the pope speaks, he does not speak in his own name. At that moment, in the final analysis, the private theories or opinions that he has elaborated over the course of his life count for nothing, as refined as they may be intellectually. The pope does not speak as an erudite individual, with his private "I," or, so to speak, as a lone observer of humanity's spiritual history. When he speaks, he draws from the "we" of the whole Church's faith, behind which the "I" must disappear.

In this context, I am reminded of the great humanist Pope Pius II, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, who, drawing from the "we" of his pontifical magisterium, sometimes found he had to speak in contradiction to the theories of the savvy humanist he had once been. When he was told about these contradictions, he usually replied, "*Eneum reicite, Pium recipite*" ("Leave Enea alone, and take Pius the pope"). In a certain sense, then, it is no small matter if the "I" replaces the "we."

But those who make the effort to study attentively all the writings of Pope John Paul II will quickly realize that this pope is very much able to distinguish between the personal opinions of Karol Wojtyła and his magisterial teaching as pope. However, he also recognizes that the two are not mutually exclusive, but reflect a single personality imbued with the faith of the Church. The "I," the personality, has entered fully into the service of the "we." He has not debased the "we" to the subjective level of private opinion, but has simply bestowed upon it the density of a personality entirely shaped by this "we," completely dedicated to its service.

I believe that such a fusion between the "we" and the "I," developed by living the faith and reflecting upon it, is the essential foundation of this pope's allure. This fusion permits him to live his sacred ministry in a completely free and natural way; it permits him to be completely himself as pope, without hav-

ing to be afraid of letting his office slide too far into subjectivism.

But how did this unity come about? How does a personal journey of faith, thought, and life arrive so deeply within the heart of the Church? This question goes far beyond simple biographical curiosity—precisely because such an “identification” with the Church, without any veil of hypocrisy or schizophrenia, seems impossible to many people today who are in anguish over their faith.

In theology it has become, in the meantime, almost a fashionable form of flirtation to maintain a critical distance from the Church, and to make it clear to the reader that he, the theologian, is not so naïve, so uncritical and servile as to place his thought entirely at the service of this faith. In this way the faith is devalued, and the hasty proposals of these theologians take nothing constructive from it and die off as quickly as they were born. This leads to the rebirth of a great desire not only to reconsider the faith intellectually and loyally, but also to be able to live it in a new way.

Wojtyla's study of philosophy

Karol Wojtyla's vocation matured while he was working in a chemical factory, during the horrors of the war and the occupation. He himself has described

this period of four years in the world of labor as the most decisive period of his life. It was in this context that he studied philosophy, learning it painstakingly from books—and philosophical knowledge at first seemed like an impenetrable jungle. His point of departure was philology—the love of language—combined with the artistic application of language, as a representation of reality, in a new form of theater. This is how the distinctive form of “philosophy” characteristic of the current pope³ emerged. It is a way of thinking in dialogue with the concrete, founded upon the great tradition, but always in search of confirmation in present reality. It is a form of thought that springs from an artist’s gaze and, at the same time, is guided by a pastor’s care. And it is offered to man, to show him the way.

I think it is worthwhile to spend a few moments reviewing in chronological order the crucial authors among whom he set off on the path of his formation. The first, as he himself recounts in his interview with André Frossard, was [the author of] an introductory manual of metaphysics.⁴ Although other students tried only to comprehend in some way the overall logic of the conceptual structure presented in the text and to fix it in their minds for their exams, he instead began the struggle for a real comprehension, for a grasp of the relationship between concept and experience. And after two months of hard work, the

“light” came on: “I understood the deep meaning of everything that I had only experienced and glimpsed before.”

Then came his encounter with Max Scheler and phenomenology. Following endless controversies about the limitations and possibilities of human knowledge, this philosophical approach sought to look again at phenomena simply as they appear, in their variety and richness. This precision in seeing, this comprehension of man beginning not from abstractions and theoretical principles, but seeking to grasp his reality with love, was—and remains—decisive for the pope’s thought.

Finally, he discovered fairly early on, before his vocation to the priesthood, the work of Saint John of the Cross, through which the word of interiority, “of the soul ripened by grace,” was opened to him.

All of these elements—metaphysical, mystical, phenomenological, and aesthetic—combined to open his eyes to the many dimensions of reality, and they became in the end a single unified perception capable of meeting and understanding all phenomena by transcending them. The crisis of post-conciliar theology is, to a large extent, the crisis of its philosophical foundations.

The form of philosophy presented in the theological schools was lacking in perceptual richness; it lacked phenomenology, and the mystical dimension

was missing. And when basic philosophical principles are unclear, theology finds the ground beginning to give way beneath its feet. That is because it is no longer clear to what extent man truly understands reality, and on what basis he can think and speak. So, it seems to me a disposition of Providence that, at this time, a "philosopher" has risen to the See of Peter, a man who does not simply take his philosophy from a textbook, but exerts the effort necessary to meet the challenge of reality and of man's quest and questioning.

The theme of Karol Wojtyla's philosophy was, and is, man. His scholarly interest was always heavily influenced by his vocation as a pastor. This helps explain why his involvement in drafting the conciliar Constitution on the Church in the Modern World⁵—a document fundamentally shaped by a concern for man—became a decisive experience for the future pope. "Man is the way for the Church." This maxim, so concrete and radical in its profundity, has always been at the center of his thought, which is one and the same with his action. The result is that the question of moral theology has become the center of his theological interests.

This was another important human predisposition in terms of taking on the tasks of the Church's supreme pastor—because the crisis in philosophical orientation is manifested above all, from the theolog-

ical point of view, as a crisis in the norms of moral theology. This is where the link between philosophy and theology is found, the bridge between rational inquiry about man and the task of theology—and this is so evident a bond that it simply cannot be set aside. Wherever the old metaphysics collapses, there also the Commandments lose their internal cohesion, and a great temptation arises to reduce them merely to the level of history and culture.

Wojtyla had learned from Scheler to investigate, with a degree of human sensitivity previously unknown, the essence of virginity, matrimony, motherhood and fatherhood, the language of the body—and, therefore, the essence of love. He incorporated into his thought the new discoveries of personalism, and this led him to the understanding that the body itself speaks, that creation speaks and shows us the way we should go. Modern thought has opened up a new dimension for moral theology, and Wojtyla has grasped this through a continual mining of his reflection and experience, of his pastoral and intellectual vocation, and he has grasped this in its unity with the great themes of tradition.

Man is the way for the Church

There was still another important element for this journey of life and thought, for the unity of experi-

ence, thought, and faith. This man's battle did not take place entirely in a more or less private sphere, solely within the walls of a factory or a seminary. It was, rather, surrounded by the flames of major historical events—Wojtyla's presence in the factory was the result of the arrest of his university professors.

His peaceful academic studies were interrupted and replaced by a grueling apprenticeship in the midst of an oppressed people. His attendance at Cardinal Sapieha's major seminary was in itself an act of resistance.

Thus the questions of freedom, human dignity, and rights, the political responsibilities conferred by faith, did not enter the thoughts of the young theologian as merely theoretical problems. Facing these was the very real and concrete necessity of that historical moment. Once again the particular situation in Poland, at the intersection of East and West, had become that country's destiny.

The pope's critics often observe that, as a native of Poland, he really knows only the traditional and sentimental piety of his country, and thus cannot fully comprehend the complicated questions of the Western world. There could not be a more ridiculous observation, which betrays a complete ignorance of history. One need only read the encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli* to get the sense that the pope needed pre-

cisely this Polish heritage to be able to take a variety of cultures into account.

Because Poland is a point of intersection for civilizations—and in particular for the Germanic, Roman, Slavic, and Greco-Byzantine traditions—the question of intercultural dialogue is in many ways more pressing in Poland than elsewhere. And therefore this very pope is a truly ecumenical and missionary pope, one providentially prepared, even in this sense, to confront the questions of the period following the Second Vatican Council.

Let us return again to the pope's pastoral and anthropological interests. "Man is the way for the Church." The authentic meaning of this often misunderstood assertion in the encyclical *Redeemer of Man* can be truly understood if we recall that for the pope, "man" in the full sense is Jesus Christ. His passion for man has nothing to do with a self-sufficient anthropocentrism. Here, anthropocentrism is open toward heaven. Every form of anthropocentrism that aims at removing God as an obstacle to man has for some time been turned into indifference on the part of man and toward man. Man can no longer consider himself the center of the world. And he is afraid of himself because of his own destructive power.

When man is placed at the center to the exclusion of God, the overall balance is upset—and then it is