

John Paul II: The Outstanding Teaching Legacy

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The twenty-fifth anniversary of the election of Pope John Paul prompts us to reflect on the importance of this remarkable papacy. It is, of course, difficult to evaluate the full extent of what the Pope has achieved in this time - the one hundred or so journeys outside Rome, the enormous number of people who have been touched by his pastoral care and concern, the historic role he played in the downfall of communism etc. However, beyond all this, beyond his missionary zeal and his work as the "world's parish priest" it is surely the outstanding body of teaching that will remain as the lasting legacy of John Paul II.

The Church twenty five years ago

When John Paul II was elected in 1978 the Church was in a state of turmoil and confusion. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) had ushered in a time of change but also of a time of uncertainty which was not the intention of the Council Fathers. Instead of the renewal that we were all looking for, the Church began to disintegrate in a tragic way. The Council did call for a new approach of the Church to the modern world, the "Old Synthesis" of Catholicism was indeed exhausted and there was a genuine yearning for new avenues in preaching the Gospel in the 20th century and beyond. The result however was in many ways the self-destruction of almost everything that the Church stood for. All was questioned and attacked – the divinity of Christ, original sin, the existence of angels, transubstantiation, clerical celibacy and of course there was the crisis over contraception which brought forth, belatedly in 1968, the Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*. The intellectual centres of the Church - seminaries, universities, and catechetical centres - were taken over by the "new theologians", who were only too keen to dismantle the past and rebuild a "new Church". But the new Church was no longer built on the unchanging teaching of Christ bequeathed to us but on new thinking which was related only marginally to the eternal truths of the Creed. Despite Pope Paul VI's defence of the Church's teaching on contraception dissent was widespread, even from whole hierarchies. In 1968 the Pope recognised the crisis of teaching when he issued his "Credo of the People of God" to reassure the faithful that the basics had not changed. Nonetheless in every statistic of the Church's life retreat was the order of the day. Mass attendance steadily declined since the new theology did not rate Sunday Mass attendance too highly! Vocations dried up. Marriages dropped steadily. Seminaries began to close, and convents in even larger numbers. Meanwhile the secularisation of the modern world continued apace.

Dissent and complacency

In Faith we saw this coming but very few listened such was the state of "adolescent post-Vatican II euphoria". There was also a complacency, much of which was inherited from the pre-conciliar Church. When we expressed our anxiety about the state of things we were told: "Everything is always like this after

a Council but do not worry. It will all settle down soon!” Well it did not, and the disintegration continued. Nowhere was this more evident at grass roots level than in catechetics and in the teaching of the faith in our schools. All the old programmes and books were thrown out. In some of our top Catholic schools the teaching of the faith stopped almost completely to be replaced by rambling discussion on sex and drugs and third world debt. In many schools there was no syllabus at all. As for apologetics, one of the strong points of the pre-conciliar curriculum, one can remember a priest Head of RE having a huge bonfire to burn all the old apologetics books. These works did need developing but nothing was put in their place. There emerged a deeply uncertain Church, riven by internal disputes. Those who were educated in Catholic schools post-1965 were in almost complete ignorance of any coherent understanding of the Catholic faith. Those in authority seemed oblivious of, or refused to see, what was going on, castigating those who protested as “conservatives” who had not accepted Vatican II, and who were obviously “on the way out”. Welcome to the “non-teaching” Church and the “spirit of Vatican II” which was always difficult to define since definitions of their nature were anathema to the new theology. This was a very serious weakness since it is obvious that a Church which does not teach clearly will die. The identities of God, of Jesus Christ, of the Mass, of the priesthood, and of the Catholic Church herself were lost in a “cloud of unknowing”. Policies in ecumenism, which all agree the Council called for, were pastorally disastrous since there seemed no reason to be a Catholic at all, or indeed after a time to be a Christian, since you could not define what that was.

The teaching Pope

So it was in 1978 that Karol Wojtyla, the first Polish Pope in history, was elected to the Papacy, taking the title of John Paul II. Looking back it seems clear now that God sent his Church the teaching Pope she needed for the time. Surely the strange new title combining two names, presumably to link the pontificates of John XXIII and Paul VI was providential. The new Pope who would become a remarkable teacher had chosen the names St John and St Paul, the two greatest teachers of the New Testament giving us the deepest and richest vision of Christ. As John Paul travelled the world he took every opportunity to teach the faith – in addresses, spiritual homilies, encouragement to the faithful, and to members of religious orders. For example in 1986 in Ars in France at the shrine of St John Vianney he gave a complete retreat to some 6,000 priests and seminarians. He has taught the faith across the globe in season and out of season. He has also not been afraid to tackle the most controversial and the most difficult subjects of the age. It is impossible in a short space to detail his achievement, but perhaps a simple overview of the extent of his teaching might be of value. There were three Encyclicals on the three divine Persons of the blessed Trinity – *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) on the Son of God; *Dives in Misericordia* on the Mercy of God our Father (1980); *Dominum et Vivificantem* on the Holy Spirit (1986). The theme he gave the Church for the new millennium was the Blessed Trinity with each year preceding the celebration of the Great Jubilee dedicated to each of the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity and the

year itself to this central theme. The Blessed Trinity would also be the central theme of the new Catechism which was to come later. On the Church's Social Teaching there was – *Laborem Exercens* (1981); *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987); and *Centesimus Annus* (1991). He re-affirmed the teaching of the Church on the sanctity of marriage and the wrongfulness of artificial contraception in *Familiaris Consortio* (1981). Responding to the decline in morality he rebuilt Catholic moral theology in his Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), and because of the widespread abuse of abortion and euthanasia he put new heart into the pro-life groups with his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), a first from the papacy specifically on this subject. For the Marian year of 1987 he gave us *Redemptoris Mater* on the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the plan of God and in the Church, re-affirming all the basic Marian doctrines of the Church and developing them as well. Following this he focused on the role of women in society and in the Church with *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988). Then in 1994, because of the widespread questioning of the Church's teaching that only men may be ordained as priests and following the acceptance of women priests in the Anglican church in 1992, he defined the maleness of the priesthood in his solemn document *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. Sunday Mass attendance was declining drastically so for the first time ever in the history of the Church he gave us a magnificent Encyclical on the significance and theology of Sunday Mass – *Dies Domini* (1998). On the Christian vocation and way of life there was – *Christifideles Laici* on the Lay Faithful (1988), *Pastores Dabo Vobis* on priestly formation (1992), *Vita Consecrata* on the consecrated life (1996), and *Dominici Gregis* on the vocation of bishops (2003). Other important documents were - *Oriente Lumen* on the Eastern Churches, and *Ut Unum Sint* on the Commitment to Ecumenism both in 1995. In the light of the downplaying of philosophy in the life of the Church there was *Fides et Ratio* in 1998. There have also been outstanding documents outlining the strategy of the Church for the Great Jubilee 2000 - *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (Preparation for Jubilee 1994) and *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (Programme for the New Millennium 2001). There have also been significant and courageous documents from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith - *On Infant Baptism*, and *On Euthanasia* (1980), *Donum Vitae* (On Respect for Human Life in its Origin) (1987), *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986); *On Christian Meditation* (1989); *On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* (1990); *On the Church understood as a Communion* (1992); *On the Reception of Holy Communion by the divorced and remarried* (1994); *Dominus Jesus* (On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church) (2000); and *on Homosexual Marriage* (2003). In addition to all this there have been the weekly catecheses in his General Audiences throughout the year. These constitute a great body of Catholic teaching in which he has covered almost all the main themes of Catholicism. This catechesis has now been published in book form in five volumes by Pauline Books and Media. These volumes under the titles: *God - Father and Creator*; *Jesus - Son and Saviour*; *The Holy Spirit - Giver of Life and Love*; *The Church - Mystery, Sacrament, Community*; and *Theotokos – Woman, Mother, Disciple*, are very readable yet make a remarkable catechetical resource at the highest level.

The “Jewel in the Crown” of his teaching

Recently John Paul has published *Misericordia Dei* (2002) concerning some aspects of the Sacrament of Penance, at long last ruling out the abuse of general absolution. Then there was *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002) on the Holy Rosary – a beautiful exposition of the theology of the mysteries of Christ with the addition of the five new Mysteries of Light, which the Church has taken to its heart, and already used widely in this first “Year of the Rosary”. His recent Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (Holy Thursday 2003) on the Church and the Eucharist is a significant re-statement of the central role of the Eucharist in the life of the Church. There is a re-affirmation of all the basic Catholic teaching on the Eucharist as true sacrifice, real presence, and holy communion. For the first time Pope John Paul gives careful reasons why communion may not be given to non-Catholic Christians. He also lists the abuses in celebrating the Eucharist and promises to deal with them. He teaches that - “The Church draws her life from Christ in the Eucharist.” – “The Eucharist builds the Church” – “the Eucharist is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.” There is an innovative chapter on “Mary, Woman of the Eucharist” and, for the first time, a reminder of the cosmic significance of the Eucharist. As well as his early letter *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979) on teaching the faith the “Jewel in the Crown” of all this teaching is surely the magisterial Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992). This new Catechism, the first full-scale compendium since the Catechism of the Council of Trent, is really a “Catechism of Vatican II”. It is based on the teaching of that Council but puts it fully within the context of the whole sweep of the Church’s teaching from the beginning. It was not simply a re-statement of the Church’s teaching but a genuine attempt at a synthesis of all the elements of a renewed Catholic faith and tradition – biblical, patristic, and liturgical – and covers the four aspects of the Church’s belief and life – the Creed, the Sacraments, Morals and Prayer. Its manner of presentation is discursive, thorough and spiritual, quoting many of the saints, but it also has “In Brief” statements, defining precisely what the Church teaches. The *raison d’être* for the Catechism was given by Joseph Ratzinger and Christophe Schonborn, the two key figures in its compilation:

“...At the Synod of Bishops in 1985, the idea was launched of a Catechism emanating from Vatican II... ‘We have to teach the faith in a world that becomes more and more a global village’....Unity is the essential feature of the Christian Faith. This vision of one faith in one world....became the driving force of discussions about the idea of a catechism...Looking for the basic principles underlying the Catechism, this principle of unity seems to be the most important of all. CCC 11 states: ‘This Catechism aims at presenting an organic synthesis of the essential and fundamental contents of Catholic Doctrine as regards both faith and morals.’ What is said here holds (or should hold) good for every catechism. A catechism is a synthesis of the essentials of the faith. The very idea of a catechism depends upon the assumption that such a synthesis is possible. From the very first paragraph, the Trinitarian dimension is central to the Catechism of

the Catholic Church. The Trinity is the overall perspective of the Catechism because it is the centre of the Christian faith..."¹

In summary it could be said that Pope John Paul, assisted by Cardinal Ratzinger (surely also a key figure in this movement for reform) has rebuilt the foundations of the Catholic faith. There has probably never been a pontificate which has taught so much and so confirmed us in the faith in a time of crisis (cf. Luke 22:31-32). It is amazing what has been achieved in teaching in these twenty-five years since 1978. In those days the leading theologians were saying that the next Pope after Paul VI would change everything. Well he has not changed everything but he has brought "new things and old" from the treasury of the faith – "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church".

Has anyone been listening?

And the response to all this teaching from the successor of St Peter? At first sight the answer must be – not much! The current "non-teaching Church", presiding over its own decline, seems to have continued oblivious of all this outstanding catechesis. Indeed there have been times, as each document has appeared from Rome, when one would have been forgiven for asking - "Is anyone there? Has anyone been listening?" In general terms the teaching has either been ignored or treated with contempt by "middle management" of the Church and in her intellectual centres. It is almost as if the liberal establishment have been in a state of denial about John Paul's teaching. Some of us recall in Rome itself during the Youth Week for the Jubilee 2000 the scandalous answers given by a Bishop from another English speaking continent to thousands of young people. They were a gross distortion of the Catholic faith and revealed an almost wilful ignorance of the Catechism in answering questions about mortal sin, confession and holy communion. The answers were all there in the Catechism but were not given. Students tell of the dissent widely taught in the papal universities of Rome itself. Where in most dioceses and parishes can you follow courses on the Pope's encyclicals, on the new Catechism? The teaching seems to have fallen into a great black hole. And yet... and yet... Jesus said: "The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice." The sheep have been listening to the chief shepherd of the flock. Many of the faithful have listened and continue to be encouraged and re-affirmed in their faith by the Pope's teaching. The ones listening have not been the "establishment", or the intellectuals but, by and large, the humble and grateful people of God – loyal priests desperately trying to hold the line in their parishes, seminarians despised by their professors, Anglican converts seeking the clear truth, devout teachers in our schools, prayerful parishioners, and members of the new movements have been enthusiastic for this teaching. Despite the Church looking more and more like a "devastated vineyard" there are signs of "green shoots" of recovery. John Paul's teaching is permeating the Church even though the sixties liberals, still in power, are ignoring it. These sixties liberals look increasingly like a group of besieged Stalinists surrounded by a growing neo-orthodox coalition of priests and laity! The new movements and new religious orders are also growing in influence. Liberalism is of its nature a dying creed.

One factor is “the law of survival of the fittest” – those who remain, who are still actually going to Church, are those who actually believe what is taught and are extremely grateful for the lead given by John Paul II. They are attempting to renew the Church according to the programme he has given us. They are the true inheritors of “the spirit of Vatican II”!

Is neo-orthodoxy enough?

But is neo-orthodoxy going to be enough? In Faith we frankly do not think so. We recommend the re-reading of Fr Holloway’s key articles in 1996 – “Theology for the New Millennium” and “The Sign we give – is neo-orthodoxy enough?”² The central question of a new synthesis of the Catholic faith in the context of modern scientific knowledge has still not been addressed: “The hopes of the Second Vatican Council remain patently unfulfilled. The fact is that the Church does not have a focused theology through which to enter the new millennium and with which to unlock the treasures of that Council.”³ Whilst we sincerely thank God for bringing back the full Catholic faith in teaching in spite of a hostile establishment of theologians there is still no synthesising principle around which to focus such a neo-orthodoxy. In the 1930s a humble and holy housewife Agnes Holloway was shown a vision of “God’s Master-Key – the Law of Control and Direction” which was given for a time when “Rome was sacked and desolate as never before – either by persecution or by war, or if by war by a war which was also a persecution.”⁴ The vision was given her for just such a time. Faith movement is founded on this vision elaborated by her son Fr Edward Holloway in his writings and in his apostolic work. In 1978 Faith had been around for only five years. It was a tiny, tiny, voice in the wilderness with no seeming support from the Church’s teaching.

At the threshold of a new vision

It is astonishing to us that in the latter years of John Paul II’s pontificate he has in his teaching brought the Church to the very threshold of that new synthesis of the Catholic Faith and the scientific vision of the universe. In some of his catecheses, in the Catechism, and in his Letter for the new millennium there has been a remarkable convergence which has put great heart into us. This teaching is quite unique at the highest level of the Magisterium. We give some important passages: On the existence of God from evolution:

“The necessity to go back to a Supreme Cause is all the greater if one considers the perfect organization which science ceaselessly discovers in the structure of matter. When human intelligence is applied with so much effort to determine the modalities of action of material particles, is it not perhaps indeed to seek their origin in a Superior Intelligence which has conceived the whole? In the face of the marvel of what can be called the immensely small world of the atom, and the immensely great world of the cosmos, the human mind feels itself completely surpassed in its possibilities of creation and even of imagination, and understands that a work of such quality and of such proportions demands a Creator whose wisdom is beyond all measure, and whose power is infinite. All

the observations concerning the development of life lead to a similar conclusion. The evolution of living beings, of which science seeks to determine the stages and to discern the mechanism, presents an internal finality which arouses admiration. This finality which directs beings in a direction for which they are not responsible or in charge, obliges one to suppose a Mind which is its inventor, its Creator." (General Audience, 10th July 1985)

On Christ as the centre of God's plan of creation:

"The name 'Jesus' contains all – the whole plan of creation and salvation." (CCC 2666) "Creation is the foundation of all God's saving plans, the beginning of the history of salvation that culminates in Christ. Conversely, the mystery of Christ casts conclusive light on the mystery of creation and reveals the end for which "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth": from the beginning God envisaged the glory of the new creation in Christ." (CCC 280) "In the creation of the world and of man, God gave the first and universal witness to his Almighty love and his wisdom, the first proclamation of the 'plan of his loving goodness' which finds its goal in the new creation in Christ." (CCC 315).

"Christ, the Son who is of one being with the Father, is therefore the one who reveals God's plan for all creation and for man in particular. 'He fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear... By his incarnation the Son of God united himself in some sense with every man' (Vat II GS 22). Christ, true God and true man, the Lord of the cosmos, is also the Lord of history, of which he is the "the alpha and the omega", "the beginning and the end" (Rev 1:8; 21:16). Jesus Christ is the new beginning of everything. In him all things come into their own, they are taken up and given back to the Creator from whom they first came. Jesus Christ is the recapitulation of everything (cf. Eph 1:10) and at the same time the fulfilment of all things in God: the fulfilment which is the glory of God....All creation is in reality a manifestation of his glory, in particular, man is the epiphany of God's glory, man who is called to live by the fullness of life in God." (Tertio Millennio Adveniente, para 4- 6)

On the cosmic meaning of the Eucharist:

"Even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation. The Son of God became man in order to restore all creation, in one supreme act of praise, to the One who made it from nothing. He, the Eternal High Priest who by the blood of his Cross entered the eternal sanctuary, thus gives back to the Creator and Father all creation redeemed. He does so through the priestly ministry of the Church, to the glory of the Most Holy Trinity. Truly this is the *mysterium fidei*

which is accomplished in the Eucharist: the world which came forth from the hands of God the Creator now returns to him redeemed by Christ.” (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 8)

On Christ as the keystone and the Church as part of God’s plan:

“In the eternal design of God the Church constitutes, in Christ and with Christ, an essential part of the universal plan of salvation in which the love of God is expressed. In God’s eternal design, the Church, as the unity of humanity in Christ the head, becomes part of a plan which includes all creation. It is a ‘cosmic’ plan, that of uniting everything in Christ the head. The firstborn of all creation becomes the principle of ‘recapitulation’ for this creation, so that God can be ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15: 28).

“Therefore, Christ is the keystone of the universe. As the living body of those who belong to him by their response to the vocation of being children of God, the Church is associated with him, as participant and minister, at the centre of the plan of universal redemption.” (General Audience, 31 July 1991) “Christians of the first centuries said, ‘The world was created for the sake of the Church’. God created the world for the sake of communion with his divine life, a communion brought about by the ‘convocation’ of men in Christ, and this ‘convocation’ is the Church.” (CCC 760)

As we celebrate the twenty fifth anniversary of the election of John Paul II we thank God for sending us this Pope to re-build the Church, for his magnificent teaching given at a time of acute crisis, and for giving her the certainty in the faith she so desperately needs. He has also brought the Church to the threshold of a synthesis of science and religion so necessary for the age. Indeed without this neo-orthodoxy a new synthesis would be impossible. He has put heart into all of us. “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?” “Yes, Lord you know everything, you know I love you”. “Feed my lambs and feed my sheep.” (John 21:15-17) For twenty-five years Pope John Paul II has followed the Lord Jesus faithfully and courageously as his chief shepherd on earth. Let us thank God for a priest who loved his Master, who showed us a great example, and who has his served his People so well.

1 Josef Ratzinger & Christophe Schonborn, Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Ignatius San Francisco 1994 (39)

2 Faith January/February 1996, and November/December 1996.

3 Faith January/February 1996.

4 Agnes Holloway, God’s Master Key :The Law of Control and Direction (Faith-Keyway Publications 1988)