

## **Servant of God: John Paul II: Both Charisma and Doctrine**

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The wealth of teaching and spirituality which Pope John Paul II left as a legacy to the Church will take many years to appreciate in full. Yet his stature as one of the great teachers of the God's people was already recognised by millions during his lifetime and has given rise to widespread enthusiasm for him to be declared a saint after his remarkable and exemplary death.

The announcement by Benedict XVI that the process of investigation with a view to his canonisation is to begin immediately is the response of the Magisterium to the manifest spiritual desire of the People of God, the *sensus fidelium*. Nothing could be more in keeping with the true spirit of Vatican II, with the Pope clearly acting as the Servant of the servants of God.

Sadly, but predictably, the usual worn out voices of dissent have been raised in objection to this. They worry that there is unseemly haste in wanting to canonise the late Pope so quickly. They still seem to cling to the misplaced hope that eventually they will get a Pope after their own heart, one who will conform the Church to the world and change the Law of God to suit the weakness and confusion of humanity. So deeply ingrained is their presumption that the course of history is an inevitable progress towards intellectual liberalism, that they are convinced that the predictable litany of doctrinal changes they campaign for simply must come about one day.

And so they counsel caution about canonising the late Pope, because they think that the judgment of posterity will sooner or later tell against John Paul II and the renewed direction he gave to the Church. What really worries them is that in John Paul II and Benedict XVI they have come up against no mere reactionaries, but men who have studied very deeply the principles behind the arguments of modern philosophy and theology and who are committed to developing a convincing and modern alternative to the pervasive relativism that has all but destroyed Western civilisation.

This is nothing to do with “undoing Vatican II” – another alarmist complaint that we hear from these quarters. Both Koral Wojtila and Josef Ratzinger were among the key advisors to the authors of Vatican II. Bishop Wojtila later wrote one of the definitive commentaries on *Gaudium et Spes* and initiated programmes of lay spiritual formation and pastoral engagement in his diocese of Krakow .

His whole life was about implementing the real Vatican II, which called for universal holiness and a new evangelisation. All his words and actions can be understood in this light: returning to the sources, refreshing the vision of Christ and spiritually equipping the whole People of God for the renewed mission of the Church in the Third Millennium.

The dissenters even intimate that there is something unseemly and untoward about one Pope declaring his predecessor a saint. The suggestion seems to be that the Papacy is a private club of self-serving autocrats that must be viewed with suspicion by the rest of God's people. Such sentiments can only spring from a completely jaundiced and dislocated view of the Church. The Kingdom of God is being interpreted according to categories of secular political wrangling – of left and right, progressive and conservative, rather than truth and goodness, faithfulness and holiness.

In truth it was always difficult to fit John Paul II into the straight jacket of theological “left” and “right”. He was too rounded, too authentic, too fully imbued with the Gospel to conform to these narrow and time-dated categories, which owe more to the conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than to the renewal of the Church in the third millennium. The words and deeds of John Paul II cut across these preconceptions of an outmoded ideological warfare, much to the perplexity of secular commentators.

His emphasis on care for the poor was regarded as refreshingly liberal, but when he emphasised other moral principles and their consequences, he was regarded as disgracefully reactionary. In fact his teaching was all of a piece, even in terms of his private philosophical views, but as we have remarked before, when he spoke as Pope, he was doing no more than expounding the teaching of the Church.

Those who wish to rewrite the Church's teaching to fit the age – an age that is fast passing, we might add – are still trying to portray the man as contradictory: a narrow minded Polish cleric with a happy knack for populist appeal, perhaps? Or an articulate and charismatic priest/poet with some unfortunate authoritarian instincts and Victorian views?

They are prepared to concede that he held the world's attention in remarkable ways, attracting the young in droves, a born communicator, a prophetic figure of spiritual depth and profound interiority born from rich and often painful experience, a man of courage and heroic endurance, a celebrity of the religious sphere. How could they not recognise all this, since even the secular world saw it and honoured it too? It is impossible to dismiss someone of such evident spiritual stature out of hand, so the fall back position for the dwindling cabal of liberal dissent is to try to make a division between his personality and his doctrine.

The deep devotion and admiration evoked by Pope John Paul II is dismissed as a passing wave of popular sentimentality, perhaps to be compared to that surrounding the death of Princess Diana. The enthusiasm he elicited among young people is explained away as the exuberance of youth, the immature adulation of a hero or pop idol etc. etc.

All this shows is how utterly out of touch the “progressive/liberal” mindset really is. It was precisely the doctrine that attracted the young to the Pope in such phenomenal numbers. Do the young not have minds? Are they not hungry for truth and purpose in their lives? Does it not occur to these people that that the rising generations actually accept Catholic orthodoxy and welcome it with joy as the answer they are looking for? Then again, perhaps they do realise this and it scares them, because it challenges all their assumptions about the credibility of Catholic doctrine and where the future of the world really lies.

John Paul II understood that to teach young adults the truth with clarity, conviction and pastoral warmth is an act of love, and that it is received as such by the youth of today. He knew this from his experience as a pastor and bishop with youth groups in Poland and he simply continued this ministry on a worldwide scale.

Very much on the model of our own Faith groups in this country, he taught and explained the full richness and mystery of Catholic doctrine and spirituality, encouraging regular confession, Eucharistic adoration, Marian devotion and a personal life of prayer, together with the warmth of honest friendship and social solidarity. He never ducked the difficult issues of chastity and personal relationships, just as he never ducked the challenges of social justice either.

Young people flocked to listen to him because they knew he told them the truth. Why should they bother turning to the Church for watered down hedonism, when they can get the full blown reality of it in our sin-sick cities any night of the week? What the young are looking for is a credible alternative to all that. They want to hear a Voice that speaks with the courage of its own convictions.

Of course they want compassion and understanding too, as we all do; but that does not mean compromise. It is no compassion to tell a sick person that they do not need to get well, that they are fine “just as you are”. What they need is someone to hold their hand as they get well, someone to stay with them through the setbacks and the struggles on the journey to recovery, but also someone to keep urging them to take the right medicine and listen to the doctor.

John Paul II never merely stated the truth coldly and harshly. He tirelessly explained the vision of Man in Christ, always looking for new and vibrant ways to express the unchanging Truth of God that meet both the insights and objections of the modern world. He fully acknowledged the difficulties that human beings experience in trying to live up to the standards of Jesus, but he was never ashamed of the Lord and his message. He never trimmed the truth for fear of being rejected or criticised.

Instead he always urged us to be generous in our response to Christ, pointing out the joy of discipleship, the peace of true conversion and the strength that comes from integrity and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It was also plainly

evident to all that he spoke from personal experience, he practiced what he preached. You simply cannot separate the man from his doctrine. People loved him and listened to him because he taught them with authority.

Indeed how very like Jesus he was in this. The crowds hung on the Lord's words too. It was the theological liberals of the day – the Sadducees – who opposed him most bitterly for his doctrine. They too made a snide and specious distinction between the undoubtedly magnetic personality of the prophet from Nazareth , which of course they admired most sincerely, and his unpalatable doctrines which they loathed heartily.

His disciples, on the other hand, knew that he told them the truth, even when they found it hard to listen to and harder to live. The apostles themselves were dismayed at some of what he said, but they were humble enough to admit that the contradiction was in their own hearts, not in the psyche of the Teacher. It has been the same time and again down the ages with all the saints of Christ too. We admire their deeds and their personalities, but we balk at their teachings, especially about personal holiness.

It is true that there was also a party of religious self righteousness and rigidity – the Pharisees - in the Lord's day too. They in their turn were shocked by his warnings about wealth and worldly power, his great concern for the lapsed, his reaching out to people of other faiths, his love for the little ones.

The modern Saducees – the alternative magisterium of theological dissent - do their best to portray Pope John Paul II and, of course, his successor in this Pharisaic guise. They lament the return of sound doctrine and good discipline in the Church as a sign that we are returning to the bad old days. This is nonsense. That there were some negative aspects about the not so distant past, we do not deny: fear of modernity, cold legalism and lifeless uniformity. Yes, it is right that all this should be left behind, but it is absurd to tar Pope John Paul II with this brush.

For example, his criticism of Liberation Theology is now cited as evidence that he opposed social action and supported oppressive dictators against the interests of the poor. This is either stunning ignorance and prejudice or wilful mischief making, for you only have to read his social encyclicals – he wrote more than any other Pope in history – to know differently.

What he warned sharply against was priests holding political office, an exclusive emphasis on political and social effort as the road to redemption at the expense of personal conversion through grace and prayer. He was also deeply concerned about theologians adopting the Marxist worldview as the framework for their thought and actions. When it came to Marxism, he knew what he was talking about, both in theory and in practice.

The same can be said of his views on the role of women in the Church and the world. The definitive pronouncement that the Church does not have authority to ordain women cannot be honestly cited to portray him as a misogynist. Nor does it prevent us from reflecting on the deep and important mystery of the meaning of the sexes in God's plan of salvation. John Paul II did much, said much and wrote much to encourage respect and partnership between men and women in service of Christ.

Just because the dissenters have not got what they wanted, they presume that those in authority are motivated by either ignorance or prejudice or both. Again there seems to be a presumption underneath all liberalism that if someone really thought about things with any clarity, they would come to the same liberal conclusions.

It is tacitly assumed that anyone who accepts orthodox Catholicism has either suspended their intellect or that their faith is childish, uncritical and superstitious. This reeks of intellectual snobbery and also of a blind inability to contemplate the validity of any thoughts other than their own. Actually both John Paul II and Benedict XVI very obviously give the lie to this, because of their famously towering intellectual abilities.

There has always been a ferment of debate among theological schools in the Church and long may it continue. But this is something quite different from dissent against already defined doctrines and basic moral teachings. Discussions have to come to conclusions at times, which means that not everything can be constantly called into question. However this does not mean an embargo on asking questions. As Newman famously remarked: "A thousand questions do not make a doubt". Authoritative pronouncements may close some doors, but they also open up new vistas of exploration and adventure.

There are many legitimate areas of discussion and there is always a need to ponder, discuss and further develop our understanding of Catholic doctrine. This magazine is dedicated to that task too. But the fact is that Christianity is a religion of revelation, of light shed on the world from above, it is the religion of the Word who is Truth and Life. It is a religion of Magisterium – of the master's Voice. And whilst it is true that the Church must constantly learn to speak in a language the world understands, this does not mean she must say everything that the world wants to hear.

The fact is that the vast majority of God's people rejoiced at the ministry of Pope John Paul II, not just for his radiant and engaging personality, but for his tireless work of explaining and exploring Catholic doctrine. For the publication of the new Catechism of the Catholic Church alone, he will be remembered with undying honour and affection for centuries to come.

His encyclicals, apostolic letters and papal allocutions are a treasure trove of wisdom and insight, which far from closing the door on theological discussion, have set the stage for a great new development of doctrine which is still to come. Not all these sources are of the same level of authority, it is true, but if, and most likely when, Pope John Paul II is canonised, he must surely be declared a Doctor of the Church as well as a great modern saint.