

## John Paul II: A Response to The Tablet

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After the death of Pope John Paul II, the editor of The Tablet, Catherine Pepinster, decided that the Cardinal electors would benefit from heeding her incisive advice. Referring to John Paul, she declared, "The task of the conclave of cardinals will be to distinguish the man from the message."

Strangely enough, it is a sentiment with which Pope John Paul would have agreed. Writing in his spiritual testament, he seemed to be keenly aware of the lowliness of his own person: "Of everyone I ask forgiveness. I also ask for prayer, that the Mercy of God may appear greater than my weakness and unworthiness." He realised that he was a servant of the Word, a proclaimer of a Message which came not from him but from the Lord he served. He knew he was not worthy – which of us is? - but he prayed that he would be faithful, a fidelity that would even include his death: "Accepting that death, even now, I hope that Christ will give me the grace for the final passage, in other words my Easter. I also hope that He makes that death useful for this more important cause that I seek to serve: the salvation of men and women, the safeguarding of the human family and, in that, of all nations and all peoples." How his prayer was answered!

Unfortunately, the editor of The Tablet was not thinking along the same lines when she urged the Cardinals to bear in mind the difference of man and message. She urges the cardinals "not to let their immense admiration for the former, commit them uncritically to the latter." Strangely, but not unexpectedly, she inverts the distinction of man and message that the previous Pope made. The real problem with Pope John Paul was not his person but his teaching, the message he proclaimed. It was this that was wrong. "He wanted a Church of one mind, his mind," the editor declared. The message that John Paul taught was not the Truth of Christ but a set of what Pepinster calls "positions and policies".

Her inversion and position betray the nature of the real theological rift in the Catholic Church. "He wanted a Church of one mind." The question is, "Whose mind?" The mind of The Tablet? If there was a Pope who heeded the stance of Pepinster and co (the issue of The Tablet commemorating John Paul involved the participation of people like Michael Walsh, Clifford Longley, Richard A. McCormick and Charles Curran!), I am sure they would be the first to tell the rest of us to conform. There is a certain hypocrisy in this: they urge the need for a decentralized papacy but they would want a papacy that would enforce the changes in Church teaching that they deem necessary. They reserve the right to dissent under a papacy that does not follow their approach (and, thankfully, which Papacy ever has?) but they would want to use the office of the same papacy to undermine the essential nature of that office. One almost has a sense that they interpret a papal election to be the same as a party political election: a new Pope will reverse and change the previous Pope's "policies" (i.e., teachings

of the Church) in much the same way that a new Prime Minister does with his predecessor's policies. This is a Church reduced from the magnificent vision of Vatican II, a vision so clearly espoused by Pope John Paul II, to one of a merely human institution, whose teachings are revisable, indeed capable of reversal, and whose mind is the result of a competing set of views and opinions.

Whose mind therefore? The truly Catholic answer is to point to the Mind of Christ. Indeed, the idea of there being one mind for the Church is not as repulsive as Catherine Pepinster implies. The Acts of the Apostles tell us that the believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (2:42) "The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul." (4:32) The Apostles very early on resolve disputes for the believers and they do so because they claim that it is their office to do this. "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," they declare (Acts 15:28 ). The notion of the development of the Creed arises from the need to have one Mind in the Church. We see its roots in the Council of Jerusalem and in Paul's teaching in the first letter to the Corinthians that he delivered to the people the only Gospel he knew, the Gospel he himself received, "in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast." (1Cor 15:1-2)

Unless there is one Mind in the Church, then we lose all point of contact with the historical Christ. He is the source of all that the Church is. If all teachings are revisable, if the Church has got it wrong, then how can we say anything that is guaranteed to be the truth concerning Christ? Everything would be up for grabs. Nothing would have the assurance of truth. The Church would be reduced to being a political institution with no definitive assurance that the Lord is with us, an institution merely the result of the ceaseless eddies and tumults of history, a history where there is no definitive fact, no final truth, but just the tide of relativism and the futility of life.

The Church's one Mind is based upon the assertion of a real historical event: Jesus Christ really and truly rose from the death in his physical body and is now alive forever to intercede with us and to guide us in risen glory. He is the one Saviour of the world for all time. The whole claim of the Church flows from this fundamental fact. "As the Father sent me, so do I send you," said the Risen Lord to the apostles (Jn 20:21 ). He then told them, "I am with you always, yes, to the end of time." (Mtt 28:20) "And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it." (Mk 16:20)

If the Church has been fundamentally wrong, as the Tablet claims, in asserting certain teachings as being tied to salvation, declaring that certain ways of behaving can separate us definitely from the Lord (for example, contraception, abortion, and divorce and re-marriage), then we can not pretend that the Lord is with the Church, that the Church has inherited the apostolic charism of truth, that the apostolic office of the college of bishops united to the Pope has had the

guarantee and assurance of the Lord's own guiding presence. If that is so, then the claims of the Church are empty – and the witness to the Resurrection is forever vitiated. This is no exaggeration: at stake is the ability of the believer to maintain a credible faith in the witness and message of the Church.

In view of this, it becomes clear why the stance of the Tablet is so intellectually and spiritually impoverished. At the same time the greatness of John Paul II is revealed in his fidelity to the Mind of Christ, to what we call the Magisterium or Teaching Office of the Church. He did not teach his own message. He handed on what he himself had received (cf. 1 Cor 15:3). This is essential to the Papal and Episcopal office. If Pepinster and co had really read and digested the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, particularly in *Lumen Gentium*, they would realise that Pope John Paul could do no other than what he did. The same held true for Pope John Paul I and also for Paul VI who was vilified in life for his fidelity and only lionized after his death by those who continued to dissent and who were disappointed by the pontificate of John Paul II.

It is Pope John Paul's fidelity that really is at the heart of the calls for him to be known as "John Paul the Great". In her editorial the editor of *The Tablet* wrote, "Greatness in Popes is more usually associated with reform than with reaction, and there was undoubtedly a reactionary side to his papacy." Pot, kettle and black spring to mind. The Tablet's whole response to the pontificate of John Paul II has been one long reaction against him. Editorial after editorial has pursued a systematic dissent from his teaching, from the Church's teaching. It is the Tablet that has been reactionary. We need no lectures from an editor whose evident distaste for Pope John Paul was evidenced in an article in *The Independent* deploring the "spectacle" of the very public death of Pope John Paul. That in itself was a very telling reaction.

Pope John Paul's fidelity however has been remarkably creative and energizing for the Church. There is no doubt that in 1978 he assumed the Petrine office in a Church that was being paralyzed by dissent, division and a lack of a clear sense of what was to be believed and taught anymore. His first homily as Pope invited all humanity to "open the doors to Christ," and he set about helping the Church to rediscover once more the real, true face of Jesus, not the Jesus of the dissenters, but the Jesus known and loved and proclaimed by the Church through the ages, the Son of God and Son of Mary. In that homily he declared, "Today and in this place there needs to be again pronounced and heard the same words [of Peter]: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.'" This was not a work of reaction. It was the work of renewal.

Over the following twenty-six years, Pope John Paul continued to proclaim Christ and to hand on faithfully but also refreshingly the living faith of the Church. Many have commented on the debt the Church owes to his impressive development of the Church's social doctrine. However, there are many, many other areas where he showed how extraordinary his pontificate was.

His encouragement of a real dialogue between religion and science was marked by daring moves to rehabilitate Galileo and to take seriously the theory of evolution. His constant encouragement and involvement in the Pontifical Academy of Sciences has ensured the prestige of that body for believing and non-believing scientists alike. His great encyclical *Fides et Ratio* was a call for theologians, philosophers and scientists to engage in a work of synthesis, to show how ultimately all things “hold together” in Christ (cf. Col 1:17).

He helped to develop the Church’s teaching on sexual ethics in a broader context of the actual nature and dignity of the human person, the theology of the human body and the need for relationships to be faithful to what it means to be a human person. In this he tried to show how positive the Church’s moral teaching really is and how it is the ultimate safeguard of what it means to be human. In doing this he re-vindicated the concept of the Natural Law and also helped to demonstrate that the most authentic arena for human perfection is in relationship to Christ. He remained faithful to the teaching of the Church concerning sex and he did this in continuity with John Paul I, Paul VI, John XXIII – and all the other successors of Peter. It was not his or anyone else’s “policy” to change.

He engaged in a thoroughgoing catechesis on the sacraments and developed key insights into the living presence of the Persons of the Trinity in their administration. He linked the sacramental life more securely to the sanctification of the world in the daily life of believers, teaching that the sacraments also involved a moral impetus to re-shape the world in every sphere. In this way the tendency to distinguish secular and religious spheres was challenged. Furthermore, in this context, he re-affirmed the reality of grace and the efficacy of the sacraments. He showed how the life of baptism was an on-going source of life for the believer and that every Christian could tap into its power for the renewal of their daily lives. He taught beautifully that the sacrament of Confession was a real encounter with the mercy of God that every Christian needed from the depths of their being. His evident love for the Mass was always moving. Yet he backed this up by a clear teaching concerning the true meaning of the Mass and a defense of the Real substantial Presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. He re-explored the importance of the Sunday Eucharist and showed that the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays was not just based on some ecclesiastical precept but arose from the nature of belief itself, from the link between the death of Christ and His Resurrection on Easter Sunday, and the Sunday Mass as something that a true disciple of Christ knows that they need if they are to be faithful. Furthermore his teaching concerning the beauty and indissolubility of marriage had its roots in the perpetual union of Christ and the Church: marriage was presented as an essential component of the life and work of the Church; the ethics of marriage flowed from the nature of love and the nature of what it means to be a person; but these in their turn were fulfilled and strengthened in a unique way by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony.

Pope John Paul engaged in a development of doctrine in so many areas – the nature of the Church, the relationship of the Church to other Christian communities and other religions, his re-vindication of the need for the Church to engage in evangelization, on the real need of the human race to receive the human race. His work in the defense of the dignity of every human life, from conception through to natural death, has been of especial importance. Across the world it has encouraged movements for the defense and promotion of the value of human life and the impact of his remarkable teaching, crystallized and expounded in *Evangelium Vitae*, will show its fruitfulness for years to come. It was a teaching that had its critics – usually on the periphery of the Church. It is of note that *The Tablet*, in the editorial already quoted, refers in disapproving terms to the Pope's intervention with the German Bishops' Conference concerning the abortion counseling services they promoted which were, at the very least, implicitly co-operating with referrals for abortions.

Much of this work was summed up in one of the most significant contributions to the life of the Church after Vatican II, namely *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This beautiful compendium of faith was a major achievement of the pontificate of John Paul II. The editor of *The Tablet* lamentably fails even to mention it in her editorial. Yet the *Catechism* has become an international bestseller and was the fruit of a far-reaching consultation with the Bishops of the Church – giving the lie again to the notion that Pope John Paul was an autocratic leader who never listened to the voice of the wider Church. As a document it has been at the heart of the renewal of faith in many countries – renewal, note, not reaction – and, because of its richness and depth of reflection, it has been a source of inspiration to many of the new movements and communities that have flourished since 1978. Much of this is because it gives a faithful and clear presentation of the life and faith of the Church. It is this clarity and depth that was at the heart of Pope John Paul's papacy – and at the heart of what the Church claims to be. Only if the Church has a real message, a real identity, rooted in the historical Risen Christ, can she say anything to our contemporaries concerning the reality of the love of God for all humanity and the need to change our world in justice, truth and peace. If everything is revisable, then none of this is possible, because no-one will be able to agree as to what real peace or justice or even truth really are. The *Catechism* is of profound importance therefore for the Church's dialogue with and evangelisation of the modern world because it shows why the Church believes and teaches what it does. It is not just a source of renewal for believers – it is an essential tool for reaching out to the world around us.

These are just some – how many more there are! – of the ways in which Pope John Paul showed his greatness as Pope in terms of the handing on of the Faith. In the commemorative issue of *The Tablet* the late Richard McCormick SJ wrote that “the teaching of this truly remarkable man was more effective in his deeds than in his written deeds.” McCormick believed that the Pope's teaching was secondary to his symbolic actions. This fails to appreciate that John Paul's

actions often arose from the Faith he articulated in his teachings. Indeed, behind McCormick's view was a certain disquiet with a number of teachings that he lists: "reproductive ethics (contraception, sterilisation, in vitro fertilisation) mandatory priestly celibacy, pastoral treatment of homosexuals and of the divorced and remarried, and the ordination of women." He did not like the "black-and-white way" that the Pope linked contraception, sterilization and reproductive technologies to the culture of death. Yet to many, Pope John Paul was a clear prophet in this regard, showing how the warnings of Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* were being fulfilled in our time, but developing these insights in a clearly original way, contrasting the civilization of love and culture of life with the culture of death which has become more and more prevalent in western culture.

No. McCormick and Pepinster are wrong. One of the core elements of John Paul's greatness has been his teaching. It is this teaching, which was a faithful handing on of the Mind of Christ, which inspired him in so many of the dramatic and truly great gestures of his pontificate: the apologies for the failings of the children of the Church; his gatherings of leaders of world religions; his reaching out to Judaism, movingly and unexpectedly expressed in his action at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem where he quickly placed a prayer of apology for the persecutions of the Jewish nation; his gatherings of young people from across the world for World Youth Days.

There are, of course, many areas of concern for the Church today. The lapsation, particularly in West, of many Catholics is a problem that has not been properly faced up to. It is disingenuous, however, to attribute this to the "policies" of John Paul II. After all, in many European countries there has been a significant failure to hand on the faith to our young people. It is the movements that are largely having most success with forming and renewing the faith of the youth – and this is because they do not dissent: they are faithful to the Mind of Christ in the Church. It is dissent and the lamentable failure of the dioceses and schools (largely because of the policies set for them by dioceses and Episcopal conferences) that have failed to hold fast the hearts and minds of a generation. Dissent has nothing to offer. It has nothing in common with the act of faith. It is the fidelity of believers and the fidelity of movements that is having a fruitful effect in the life of the Church across Europe. It is this fidelity that Pope John Paul himself lived and which he encouraged in the Church of today.

Throughout the world the fruitfulness of this is seen in the increased numbers of vocations to the priesthood and the proliferation of new religious and consecrated communities. The new movements are also a sign of this work of the Spirit. There is an increased attempt to engage in the work of evangelisation, again largely inspired by Pope John Paul II. The work of ecumenism is being approached far more realistically, and as a result far more positively, without a facile optimism that was in itself more destructive because the Church could not deliver what some had naively promised. Yes, there is more to be done and problems to be addressed. But what has the work of dissent achieved? Nothing

except division, hardly a fruit of the Spirit. Dissent has not renewed the Church largely because it does not and cannot touch the heart. The dissent displayed by journals like The Tablet reduces the Church to a merely political institution. Their critique is jaded and marked by the anger that the withholding of the full act of faith always brings. The Pope saw the Church as the work of the Spirit, the Body of Christ, something alive with the mercy of the Father who wants all people to be saved. This is one of the many reasons why his pontificate will be more enduring and more renewing than anything offered by the dissenters.

For he was a Pope who kept faith with the Mind and Heart of Christ and he handed on the Faith in a truly remarkable way. He was a holy man who loved God and opened himself to all peoples. Through his adherence to the Faith, he helped to transform the world even politically and he has set the foundations for a profound renewal of the Church. He helped to reinvigorate the Church from a period of decline and confusion. Even in his dying he witnessed to the beauty and dignity of life and the redemptive holiness of suffering. He truly is John Paul the Great.

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