

## JOHN PAUL II AND HUMAN DIGNITY

by Tracey Rowland

Public Lecture for Feast of Sts Peter & Paul, June 2005

Prior to his election as Pope John Paul II, Karol Wojtyla was a Cardinal Archbishop of Cracow, and from 1954-1958, a Professor of Ethics at the Katholik University of Lublin, the only Catholic institution of higher education in the Eastern bloc during the 40 years of Communist rule after the Second World War. His philosophy essays were frequently published in the phenomenology journal *Annalecta Husserliana*; his poetry was published in various Polish literary journals; and he wrote a play about courtship and marriage which after his election to the papacy was made into the Hollywood movie “The Jeweller’s Shop” starring Oliver Hussy and Burt Lancaster. His *curriculum vitae* thus reads something like the following: poet, priest, philosopher, playwright, Pope.

For Wojtyla the young philosopher, a major problem facing the Church was the persuasive influence of visions of the human person which denied the human capacity for free will. For the Marxists, human beings were products of their class, driven by economic interests. In the words of the Bolshevik theoretician, Nikolai Bukharin, human beings are ‘concentrated collections of social influences united in a small unit as the skin of a sausage is filled with sausage meat’. For those influenced by Freud, the form of the determinism was not so much economic as sexual. For the Nazis it was race, and for the

more intellectual of them, there was the Nietzschean belief that European civilisation had been weakened by the Christian understanding of human dignity and morality. Nietzsche had accurately observed that the effect of Christian morality was to sever the pagan link between dignity and power. In the words of Adolf Hitler, The Ten Commandments are a device to protect the weak from the strong.

After the Second World War, in the early 1950's, when Poland had endured the fate of being attacked, though in different ways, by both the Bolsheviks and the Nazis, Wojtyla, along with the Dominican scholar Albert Krapiec, set about developing a philosophical anthropology which would defend the dignity of the human person by focusing on the human capacity to rise above all manner of social, economic and psychological conditioning through the exercise of a free will. This anthropology took its final academic form in the publication of his work *The Acting Person* in 1969.

The ideas contained in this work are often summarised under the label of Lublin Thomism. The important point here is that his solution to the anthropological challenges of the ensemble of Marxists, Freudians and Nietzscheans, was not a mere warmed up late scholastic Thomism, something which would have been about as effective as the Polish cavalry charge against German tanks in 1939. Rather, he took the classical Thomist insight that every human action has two dimensions: the transitive and intransitive, meaning that every one of our actions has both an internal and external effect, and synthesised this with insights from the Existentialist and Personalist movements. In so doing he linked human dignity, not to power, but to the human capacity for self-

transcendence. He argued that human persons can transcend their cultural conditioning, can arise above the temptation to do evil, if they train their wills on the good, and their intellects on the true. He also made the very important point that it is primarily through the gift of ourselves to others that we develop and mature as persons; and that relationality, the capacity for friendship, is a part of our very nature. It is not something extra added to an otherwise already complete human being. Just as the Persons of the Trinity exist only in relation to the other Persons, so too the identity of the human being is inescapably related to the individual's relations to others.

In this context one of his most famous axioms is that 'action reveals the person'. The authentic person is not, as the Nietzscheans would have it, the one who has managed to combine his drives in a most original and powerful way, but the person who manifests a kind of integrity of being which is only possible when one consistently uses one's will to the pursue the good. In contrast to this vision of authenticity, Wojtyla was critical of two types of inauthenticity he believed were prevalent in contemporary western society. These are similar to the Sartrean notion of bad faith. The first he described as servile conformism, the second as non-involvement.

He noted that the term 'conformism' denotes a tendency to comply with the accepted custom and to resemble others, a tendency that in itself is neutral, in many respects positive and constructive or even creative, and indeed, this constructive and creative assimilation in the community is a confirmation and also a manifestation of human solidarity. But he observed that when it begins to sway towards servility, it becomes

highly negative. Inauthenticity, which takes the form of a servile conformism, equals a weakness of personal transcendence and a weakness of the capacity for self-determination and of choice.

The second form of inauthenticity, that of 'non-involvement' is a rejection of the possibilities for solidarity. It is a stoic egocentrism according to which the person withdraws from making decisions and taking actions. Much of what happened in World War II could have been avoided if these two forms of inauthenticity were not common spiritual dispositions.

While Wojtyla was working away in Lublin, the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac was approaching the same problem from a different trajectory. In his *Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, first published in 1944, de Lubac argued that all the various alternative humanisms to the Christian (eg, the Nietzschean, Comtean, and Marxist) were destined to end in contradictions and the disintegration of the human capacity and quest for self-transcendence and integrity.

In 1961 Cardinal Wojtyla and Henri de Lubac became colleagues at the Second Vatican Council and de Lubac's friendship and intellectual affinity with Wojtyla was made evident in his writing of the preface to the Polish edition of Wojtyla's seminal work on sexuality, entitled *Love and Responsibility*.

The London based theologian Paul McPartlan has observed that the most quoted passage of the Conciliar documents by John Paul II was paragraph 22 of *Gaudium et spes*. This paragraph is almost word for word taken from a passage in de Lubac's 1947 work *Catholicisme*. It reads as follows:

The Truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father, and His Love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.

Paragraph 24 of *Gaudium et spes* was also frequently cited by John Paul II. It reads:

The Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, "that all may be one. . . as we are one" (John 17:21-22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.

These two paragraphs have the effect of linking the idea of the human person as a creature with a divine pedigree, not merely made in the Image and likeness of God (the *Imago Dei*), but as Augustine Di Noia OP recently expressed it, 'created in the image of God in order to grow into the image of Christ'; to the notion of self-transcendence achieved by making of oneself a gift to others.

After the Council Henri de Lubac was highly critical of interpretation of *Gaudium et spes* which would make it an endorsement of varieties of secular humanism. Although Cardinal Wojtyla did not weigh into this criticism, perhaps because secular humanism

was much less a problem in Poland in the 1960's, 70's and 80's, then in was in the free West, especially de Lubac's France; after his election to the papacy, Wojtyla raised de Lubac to the status of Cardinal and constantly emphasised that *Gaudium et spes* needs to be read through the lens of paragraph 22, that is, through the lens of the most Christocentric paragraph in the entire document, which, when applied, has the effect of undermining any kind of secular humanist or otherwise liberal reading of this document.

In a speech delivered by Wojtyla on one of his early return visits to Poland after his election to the papacy, to an audience of scholars at Lublin University, he said:

The reduction inherent in the Enlightenment view of man, of 'man in the world', to the dimensions of an absolute immanence of man in relation to the world, ushers in not only Nietzsche's issue of the death of God, but the prospect of the death of man who in such a materialistic vision of reality does not in the final eschatological sense have any possibilities other than those objects of the visible order.

This became a theme reiterated throughout his encyclicals – particularly in his so-called Trinitarian encyclicals: *Redemptor Hominis*, *Dives in Misericordia* and *Dominum et vivificantem*. In each of these the human person is situated in a relationship with one of the Persons of the Trinity. In a playful polemical shot at the Marxists, *Redemptor Hominis* began with the words “Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of Man, is the Center and Purpose of Human History” – a direct counter-assertion to the opening sentence of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, that the central dynamic of world history is class struggle. The dignity of workers was however defended in his trilogy of social justice encyclicals: *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo rei Socialis* and *Centesimus Annus*. In the first of these he argued that the intransitive effect of human labour, that is, labour's effect on the

development of the human personality, is actually more important than the things produced; and he was critical of capitalism for reversing the priority.

In the later half of his papacy, after the defeat of Communism in Central Europe, encyclicals such as *Veritatis splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae* included criticisms of conceptions of human dignity derived from the Liberal and Nietzschean traditions, which seek to ground dignity in the human capacity for autonomy. Such conceptions of human dignity are related to the practices of what he called a culture of death; against which he juxtaposed the values of the civilisation of love. In the words of a John Paul II admirer, the Scottish Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, the human person is not merely a rational animal, but a culture transcending dependent rational animal.

This quality of dependence may appear as a weakness from the perspective of hostile traditions which equate dignity with power, but John Paul II spent his entire pontificate arguing against this relationship. In *Fides et Ratio* (33) he went so far as to argue that truth is attained not only by way of reason, but also through trusting acquiescence to other persons; and indeed that reason needs to be sustained by friendship. He certainly did not want us to be irrational animals, or culturally determined and imprisoned animals, but his conception of human dignity had no difficulty embracing dependent animals.

If John Milbank and Alasdair MacIntyre are correct in arguing that ultimately the truth of any tradition is defended more by narrative than by dialectics, that is, more by culturally embodied practices, then by intellectual argument; the manner in which John Paul II died, supported by the prayers of his friends, particularly by millions of Catholic youth and

utterly dependent upon his doctors and aides, yet absolutely dignified; may be at least as powerful a witness as all his homilies and encyclicals. As Augustine observed: In the composition of the world's history under divine providence there is a beauty arising from the antithesis of contraries – a kind of eloquence in events, instead of in words.