

"Personalism" In The Social Teaching Of John Paul II

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Jeffrey Kirby, of the North American College in Rome, examines the central importance of the Pope's personalist philosophy in his social teaching.

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The Church As Defender Of Human Dignity

In his anniversary exhortation on the office of the bishop issued this year, Pope John Paul II devotes a complete section to the bishop "before the challenges of the present," a chapter which upholds the social doctrine of the Church and expounds on the bishop as a "prophet of peace," "defender of human rights," and "father of the poor." This inclusion of the social teachings - from justice and peace and inter-religious dialogue to economic life and respect for the environment to health care and the treatment of migrants - illustrates the intimate place of the social doctrines in the Gospel message, as well as their particular emphasis, in the pontificate of John Paul II.

The history of the social teachings of the Church has always been understood within certain principles: the social good, explicitly taught in the modern era by Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* (1891); subsidiarity, elaborated by Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931); and solidarity, developed in *Pacem in Terris* (1963) by Pope John XXIII. Pope John Paul II, as archbishop of Krakow, helped to write *Gaudium et Spes* at the Second Vatican Council, which contributed to the social doctrines by adding a greater stress on the subjectivity of the human person, what can be called the "personalist principle."

The personalist principle insists on placing the human person in the centre of the social order and using his divinely-given dignity to judge and coordinate policy and efforts of and for the community. It sets the full human person, seen not only as a "political animal" and an economic consumer, but also as a religious, cultural, familial and moral agent, as the set and standard of the decisions and laws of human life.

The Person And The Community: Interlocking Values

These four basic principles, their complementarity and inter-dynamic, serve as the foundation of the Church's counsel and guidance to the public forum. Pope John Paul understands that solidarity, understood as fraternal love and civil friendship, must work with subsidiarity, which is a respect for the hierarchical structure of society and the existence of intermediary groups (most especially the family) and the realization that fellowship and affairs are best practised and handled on the most appropriate level and not by over-arching governing bodies. These two must seek the social good, the desire to have the basic human and material needs met for each person in the social group. The Pope knows the danger of separating these principles or of making one superior to the others: to have solidarity alone is to fall into communism, or to solely desire the social good is to have soulless philanthropy, or to work for solidarity by itself is to eventually reach an oligarchic tyranny.

As taught by the Pope, each of these options is unacceptable to the Gospel because they diminish the human person, making him only a part or a means of a system. John Paul II, countering these misdirections, makes the continual point that the

primordial principle and starting place of the public forum must repeatedly be the personalist principle, it must always be the unrepeatable human person. A recognition of the person's dignity and destiny, rights and responsibilities, must serve as the purpose and initiative of the social order. When it is permitted, this personalist principle unites subsidiarity, solidarity and the social good and the person can grow and express his talents and creativity within his family and in civil groups and associations; he is able to work to shape his local government and express his opinion and desires; he is united with those he loves and feels directly accountable to care for others; he is able to negotiate sound culture and social assistance programmes. If grounded upon personalism, the principles of the social doctrine find a greater justification and multiple-possible expressions to the world and its authentic development.

The Gift Of Life

In Jesus Christ, the mediator and fullness of Revelation, Pope John Paul II knows that life is an unmerited and privileged gift. Its sufferings and tragedies, joys and triumphs, each compose a necessary dimension of this always-unfolding, yet never-expired, gift. The Pope believes and teaches that life, unlike the many dictates of the modern world, is not a problem to be solved but, rather, it is a mystery to be lived and cherished.

For this reason, the personalist principle particularly rests and resounds in the heart of John Paul II. Not an idealist, nor a believer in fantasies, he knows the heights and hells within the human heart. He was born in a re-established Poland, which preserved its cultural identity when it was removed by super-powers from the maps of Europe. He inherited a sacramental worldview by his Catholic faith, family life and the natural beauty of his homeland. He studied literature and drama at the Jagellonian University, which bore the motto over its major hall: "Reason rather than force," and he also studied Thomistic and phenomenological philosophy, concentrating on the interiority and ineffable worth of each person. However, he also experienced the death of loved ones - including his mother - at a young age, saw the violent attack and conquest of his country and watched his parish priests and university professors taken to concentration camps. He attended a hidden seminary and suffered a false liberation and occupation of the Polish nation by Soviet communists.

The Depth Of Catholic Humanism

John Paul II has felt the glory of the human person in poetry and seen his spirit soar on stage, he knows of the person's capacity for civil debate and disagreement and he knows that God whispers into the "place within" of every person. He also, however, has seen the

subjection of oppressive regimes, the stripping slavery of soulless politics and the harsh consequences of cold militarism. He knows the degrees of regression and the potential for evil in the person.

With this comprehensive knowledge, he still describes himself, as he did to the United Nations before the Great Jubilee, as a "witness to hope." The reason for this hope, which he is always ready to give, is the Incarnation of God as a man and his entrance into human history. In the Word made flesh and in his Paschal Mystery, the Church and its Pontiff sees the ground upon which the dignity and rights of the human person and of a just and humane society can be safely born and firmly edified.

The Vision Of God's Delight In Man

Personalism: the person is incommunicably his own and made in God's image; social good: the person is to seek his own good and the good of those in his social group; subsidiarity: the person is a member of specific groups in society and in his life he is to work and assist on the most appropriate social level; and, solidarity: the person is a communal being and is to be open to love and giving love, to being helped and to serving others. These are the principles of the Gospel's social message.

The message which is preached to the social order of the world, if permitted, can give faith to scepticism, hope to cynicism and love to apathy. It exalts the human person as the glory of creation and the cause of divine delight. Pope John Paul II, even in the midst of his anniversary celebration, reminds his episcopal brothers, the members of the Church and all people of good will, of this tested and enduring truth.

