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EFFECTS OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL:
POPE JOHN PAUL II'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS
NON-BELIEVERS

Recalling Pope John Paul II's attitude towards non-believers as a consequence of the Second Vatican Council – whose fiftieth anniversary we celebrate – requires going back to WW II, when communism set its full roots in Poland.

In his work *Memory and Identity*, the Pope recalls the commitment of Polish bishops and their strong concerns for the future of youth, as communism intended to embrace the sensitive field of education as well. Let me quote the Pope's reflections on this challenge: "For me, at that time, it was clear that their domination would last for a long time, much longer than the Nazis'. How long? That was difficult to predict¹."

On its part, the Polish Communist Party had identified the Catholic Church and its cultural and spiritual heritage, as well as its missionary zeal, as a major opposing force: the Church "is the great material obstacle, since it hosts the philosophical pillars of ideological reaction, which it constantly disseminates to the masses"².

In his recent biography of John Paul II³, Andrea Riccardi tells how the young Bishop Karol Wojtyła – in his tenure as a vicar at the Chapter of Kraków – engages in negotiations with the regional committee of the Communist Party to save the premises of the seminary, which was intended to be transformed into a pedagogical school. Without mincing

¹ Andrea Riccardi, *Giovanni Paolo II: La Biografia*, Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo Edizioni, 2011, p. 81.

² "Osservazioni sulla Chiesa cattolica in Polonia", quoted in: Andrea Riccardi, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

³ Andrea Riccardi, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

his words, he wanted to oppose the project and occupied the seminary with the canons of the cathedral⁴. Then unexpectedly, Karol Wojtyła reached the office of Lucjan Mohyka, the Secretary of the Party, and started tough negotiations with a senior Party official, namely Zenon Kliszko, also a member of the Central Committee. In the end, the bishop surrendered one floor to the pedagogical school and saved the Seminary of Kraków. This case can be considered as the first known sign of Karol Wojtyła's skill for dialogue. In fact, his natural temperament for conversation will manifest itself throughout his life: "generally, he issues no orders; rather he talks, and imposes his personality and his reasons⁵."

During the proceedings for the beatification and canonization of John Paul II, Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo stated: "He was a man of dialogue who never imposed his opinion and did all he could to put people at ease and also to avoid hurting them⁶." Indeed, Karol Wojtyła was looking for the "meanings of life" and therefore was eager to listen to others; he felt great satisfaction in learning from people he interacted with. Since he was a young boy, Karol Wojtyła had been interested in establishing contacts and relationships with men of culture, to the point that the archbishop's palace in Kraków became a place of cultural meetings and a privileged space for discussions with scholars from various disciplines, ranging from literature to astronomy, bioethics to physics.

A profound humanist, the future Pope was open to meeting others who did not share his views or, especially, his faith. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur, alluding to the famous interreligious meeting in Assisi, spoke before John Paul II in 2000: "Now, this spirit of openness lies solid on the very strong beliefs of the Man of Church that you are⁷."

The life he lived under the iron fist of the Polish communist regime did not induce a sense of struggle or revenge in Karol Wojtyła. Rather, it confirmed his innermost belief: the country needed a community of

⁴ Bernard Lecompte, *Jean-Paul II*, Paris: Folio, 2003, pp. 173–174.

⁵ Andrea Riccardi, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ "Discorso di Paul Ricoeur", in: *Notiziario Istituto Paolo VI*, 2003, vol. 45, pp. 43–46.

free souls, a united community within the society that no longer enjoyed either individual or collective freedom.

When Karol Wojtyła attended the Second Vatican Council, he worked diligently on the text that would become the Pastoral Constitution, i.e. *Gaudium et Spes*. He submitted a report about the Communist world, spoke of religious freedom and suggested that this very freedom should not be based only on philosophical principles, but rather on the human person and his/her dignity, thus providing a broader basis for dialogue⁸.

His concept of dialogue within the contemporary world relied on the idea that the Christian faith was the bearer of true freedom and made people more fully human.

When, in early 1965, Karol Wojtyła took part in the works of the Council between sessions, he starred as a true protagonist. He showed no doubt nor hesitation: atheism is not a marginal factor and it is relevant not only to countries under the yoke of communism. For him, atheism was a decisive factor in the whole contemporary world. In fact, not only does he refer to Marxist atheism, but also to the kind of atheism that too much material wealth can generate, as it spreads the illusion that consumer goods and stocks of wealth create happiness and fill both the human heart and understanding, satisfy the mankind's aspirations. Problems of the modern man, according to Karol Wojtyła, will be solved by neither atheism nor consumerism, but only by the true answers Christianity has to offer⁹.

In his concept of dialogue with non-believers, Pope John Paul II preferred focusing on the logic of topics and not on questions of authority. Of course, in the case of the last session of the Council, Karol Wojtyła – together with the Archbishop of Vienna Cardinal Franz König, the Ukrainian Metropolitane Josyf Slipyj and the Polish Primate Stefan Wyszyński – did not hesitate to state that the world should be told frankly that the imposition of atheism by states was against natural law.

Karol Wojtyła's disposition for dialogue received further momentum

⁸ Andrea Riccardi, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

with the teachings of the new Pope Paul VI, who took over from John XXIII between the first and the second session of the Second Vatican Council. Thus, in the third part of his programmatic encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, Paul VI states: “The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. The Church has something to say, the Church becomes the message, the Church becomes the talk¹⁰.”

For Paul VI, dialogue characterized the doctrinal heritage of the Church, which was formed in order to unite the divine and human thoughts expressed in the language of the modern man. As a matter of fact, Paul VI reaffirmed the permanent validity of the mission Christ entrusted to the Church, i.e. bringing the Good News to the whole world until the end of time, but stressed the need to enter into dialogue with it. If the dialogue between man and God is essential for the believer, he must also talk with his brethren in the faith, to later bring his love to believers who do not share the same faith and to people of good will who do not believe in God.

Then, just before the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI established a new body of the Roman Curia – namely the Secretariat for Non-Believers – on April 9, 1965. It was tasked with studying the phenomenon of atheism in order to investigate the fundamental motivations and establish a dialogue with non-believers.

The Second Vatican Council did not shun from elaborating a completely new vision of non-belief. In fact, in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, it stated: “Believers themselves frequently bear some responsibility for this situation. For, taken as a whole, atheism is not a spontaneous development but stems from a variety of causes, including a critical reaction against religious beliefs, and in some places against the Christian religion in particular. Hence believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion¹¹.”

¹⁰ Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam Suam*, 1964-08-06, no. 67.

¹¹ Council Vatican II, Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 19.

Not being able to do without reaffirming the doctrines and actions that do not account, in the proper manner, of the greatness of man as the image of God, the Council stresses that the Church must undertake a serious and thorough examination of the causes of non-belief. Moreover, the Church must – as a community and through each and every member – offer the testimony of its faith lived in love. Faith and charity must show their fertility and penetrate the entire life of believers.

With this in mind, the Council recognizes the need for every man to build an upright society in this world, which calls for a sincere and thoughtful dialogue with everyone.

The foundation of dialogue and cooperation between Christians and non-believers is love for the whole of humanity and service to every human being, because, for the believer, the first and second commandments are similar: love your God and your neighbour.

In the years following the Council, Cardinal Wojtyła and Primate Wyszyński shared a sense of anxiety about the unity of the Polish Church. They feared a division between liberal and conservative Catholics¹²; they were convinced that the regime would exploit it to alienate bishops from the people and intellectuals. It was a split that Eastern pro-government Catholic movements had worked on, supported by the communist power.

This is why Cardinal Wojtyła kept close contacts with groups in the Catholic intellectual world. In 1977, following a seminar on “Christians in the face of human rights”, he wrote: “The rights of the person meet in an almost organic manner the rights of the Nation and the rights of the Church, the human person is in fact rooted in the Nation and, in a different manner, is rooted in the Church. For this we are witnesses of a growing alliance between the Nation, the Church, the man and the human person¹³.”

John Paul II was characterized by his commitment to human rights, freedom and social issues, but he did not see any possibility for collaboration, let alone identification, with Marxist forces. As a matter

¹² Andrea Riccardi, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

of fact, he represents what we call “the dialogue of everyday life”, i.e. a dialogue focused on cooperation for the good of the human person and of the Nation. It is towards such a Nation that believers and non-believers can channel their efforts for the common good, refusing any compromise that can undermine the faith of believers.

John Paul II had a vision of atheism as it was in the 1980s which embraced the phenomenon as a whole. It would be simplistic, however, to assume that the Polish Pope reduced atheism to Marxism. Non-belief is not the prerogative of officially atheist regimes; it also grows within the so-called consumerist societies. At the moment, as John Paul II remarked, even in these societies can we observe an undeniable religious awakening. Therefore non-belief did not trigger defensive attitudes in him; rather, he saw it as a challenge the Church should accept, “a gigantic commitment it needs to fulfil, and for which it needs the cooperation of all its children: making the new culture of faith reincarnate again the values of Christian humanism in all the cultural venues of our time”¹⁴.

In considering the complex relationship between faith and non-belief, John Paul II referred to the “long history of salvation” and noted the complexity of the situation: “In the countries of long-established Christianity, the latter cannot be measured by surveys and statistics: it is often buried in conscience, and we have to wake it up. In countries with declared atheism, it survives despite oppression, and inspires new generations of believers, witnesses and sometimes martyrs¹⁵.”

The presence of non-believers and the environment of non-belief imposed by various political regimes or even by the growing race for profits are something that bears on the very idea of the human person, John Paul II believed. Noting that, in many cases, they lived as if God did not exist – as if they had lost sight of the “City of God”, thus limiting the human horizon in this world – the Pope concluded by

¹⁴ John Paul II, “To the participants in the Congress ‘Evangelization and atheism’”, 1980-10-10, in: *Pontificio Consiglio della Cultura, Fede e Cultura. Antologia di testi del Magistero Pontificio da Leone XIII a Giovanni Paolo II*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003, no. 1174.

¹⁵ John Paul II, “To the Secretariat for Non-Believers”, Vatican, 1985-03-22, in: *ibid.*, no. 1572.

saying: "The theoretical or practical atheism necessarily reflects onto the anthropological conception." Moreover, he asked himself: "Should a man not be the image of God and not refer to anything beyond himself, what is his value, and why does he work and live¹⁶?"

Non-belief is itself a challenge to believers who have a duty to give account of their faith and provide clear testimonies of their lives. The validity and credibility of these testimonies depend on whether religion is intended or not as a sort of "idealistic illusion" to be removed from the society and the heart of men.

While we should rejoice in the progress of human knowledge, science and technology, in man becoming more and more the master of the Universe, John Paul II saw ideological and practical atheism as threatening the mankind itself. To students who assembled in the Vatican in 1986, the Pope said: "You will find yourself in front of a scientific and technological progress of shocking magnitude, but not rarely it is ambiguous; while the number of achievements in every field grows, it seems the dignity of man is getting lost¹⁷."

The year 1989 marked a moment of immense historical achievement whose main symbol is the fall of the Berlin Wall. The collapse of political and economic system that embraced a denial of God and saw disbelief as one of its patent symbols did not go without anthropological consequences. In his Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II stated: "Marxism had promised to uproot the need for God from the human heart, but the results have shown that it is not possible to succeed in this without throwing the heart into turmoil¹⁸."

Once Marxist regimes in Europe had fallen, the official bodies where avowedly atheist men traditionally gathered disappeared as well. John Paul II then realized that an epoch-making change had taken place: non-belief, which stood as the symbol of a failed political and

¹⁶ John Paul II, "To the Sixth Symposium of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences", Vatican, 1985-10-11, in: *ibid.*, no. 1639.

¹⁷ John Paul II, "At the Pontifical Universities", Vatican, 1986-10-24, in: *ibid.*, no. 1761.

¹⁸ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 1991-05-01, in: *ibid.*, no. 2264.

economic system, was now transformed, yet no less dangerous to men. The Pope noted that non-belief “becomes cultural in nature, or rather it penetrates the immense field of culture, in particular the set of principles and values that constitute the ethos of a population”¹⁹.

So on May 25, 1993, Pope John Paul II published an important decision through the *Motu Proprio “Inde a Pontificatus”*. It opens with the expression of such beliefs: “Since the beginning of my Pontificate, accepting the wealth of stimulating ideas offered by the Second Vatican Council, I have wanted to develop the church’s dialogue with the contemporary world. In particular, I have sought to foster the encounter with non-believers in the privileged area of culture, a fundamental dimension of the spirit, which places people in a relationship with one another and unites them in what is most truly theirs, namely, their common humanity²⁰.”

Without breaking the mission entrusted to Peter and the Apostles to bring the Gospel to the edges of Earth and until the end of the world, John Paul II insisted on starting and nurturing a fruitful dialogue with all men of good will, followers of other religions and with individuals or groups that do not refer to any religion. In fact, the Pope was convinced that dialogue in the cultural field is, first and foremost, a service to men, because they become fully human through culture.

Therefore, with this *motu proprio*, Pope John Paul II decided to merge the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-Believers under a single name, i.e., the Pontifical Council for Culture. The latter has the task of promoting dialogue with “the cultures of our time, often marked by disbelief or religious indifference” and a “study of the problem of unbelief and religious indifference found in various forms indifferent cultural milieus, inquiring into the causes and the consequences”²¹. Finally, Article 4 of

¹⁹ John Paul II, “Letter to Secretary of State, Cardinal Agostino Casaroli”, 1982-05-20, in: *ibid.*, no. 1309.

²⁰ John Paul II, *Motu Proprio Inde a Pontificatus*, 1993-03-25, in: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 85 (1993), pp. 549–552.

²¹ *Ibid.*

the same *motu proprio* states: "The council also establishes dialogue with those who do not believe in God or who profess no religion, provided these are open to sincere cooperation. It organizes and participates in study congresses in this field by means of experts²²." Experiences in communist Poland might have left indelible scars for the future Pope John Paul II and definitely changed his attitudes towards disbelief and non-believers.

Despite difficult challenges posed by the communist era in Europe, Karol Wójtýła did not develop any signs of hostility toward non-believers.

Conversely, he knew how to make a clear distinction between a mistake and the person who makes the mistake²³. Although exhibited extraordinary vigour and firmness in terms of faith and principles, he remained open to dialogue with those who disagreed with his ideas or his faith. For him, personal conscience and freedom were in fact fundamental factors.

These are the two courses of action that reason moves along, reason which makes dialogue between believers and non-believers possible. Throughout his entire pontificate, John Paul II was never tired of implementing the directives of the Second Vatican Council and did not hesitate to write the following in his testament: "I am convinced that it will long be granted to the new generations to draw from the treasures that this 20th-century Council has lavished upon us²⁴."

The profession of faith, strong and enthusiastic as it is, is not a step backwards, but a taking over. It takes in its hands the two thousand years of the faith of the Church, of martyrs and of great witnesses of the tireless love of God. Therefore John Paul II had a clear perception of a world whose culture was in transformation, a world in which being a Christian meant to be a witness to the truth of faith. He was the builder of peace and dialogue between believers and non-believers, with a view to helping build a society in which all men and women had the

²² *Ibid.*

²³ John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris*, 1963-04-11, no. 82.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Testament*, Vatican City, 2005, p. 13.

opportunity to fully realize themselves and work for a society worthy of mankind.

Let me paraphrase Blessed John Paul II when he addressed representatives of the Christian Churches, Ecclesial Communities and world religions gathered in Assisi on October 27, 1986: We can say that the deeper the sense of one's own identity, the stronger the desire to meet the other.