

“The best use of freedom is charity” — of such is the doctrine of the one Pope who really did live under a current tyrannical regime.

Redemptor Hominis: The amazement of God

By James V. Schall

With these great men we also agree, dear Péguy. Will some people call us “alienated,” politicizing, impractical? We will answer: We are the children of hope, the Amazement of God.

—John Paul I, “Letter to Charles Péguy,” *Illustrissimi*, 1978.

In reality, the name for that deep amazement at man’s worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say, the Good News. It is also called Christianity. This amazement determines the Church’s mission in the world, perhaps even more so, “in the modern world.”

—John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, March 4, 1979, #10.

■ Popes are given to us, I think, so that we might know the faith and, knowing it, that we might keep it as best we might, we who are, as Aquinas said, none of us perfect. “What is this faith?” is, moreover, the major issue

of our time. Both Christians and non-Christians are greatly confused about this religion, a fact that itself has serious cultural and political consequences. Contrary to current myths, Christianity has no greater responsibility to the world than its return to its basic doctrines, those handed down from the Apostles, those to which it is obliged before the world.

Two reasons can be identified as the proximate causes of this confusion. The first arises broadly out of the “life issue,” out of what the new Encyclical calls “the lack of respect for the life of the unborn” (#8). As a result of the widespread “rejection” of the central tradition of the teaching Church in this area, a counter-ecclesiology and the theological superstructures to justify it have arisen, an ecclesiology which allows for a pope to be “wrong” in an

official pronouncement.¹ Those who hold this latter position, many of whom occupy important publications and teaching offices in the Church, the episcopal bureaucracies, the universities, and the seminaries, command most of the publicity about the Church so that the ordinary faithful have been seriously confused about the Church's powers and beliefs. Nor has the full force of the Church's own position on the life issue itself been formally presented in the public forum as a result of the internal opposition.²

Marxism penetrates

The second area of confusion, itself connected with the deeper import of the life issue, has to do with the nature and meaning of the Church's attitude to the world and to its tasks. There has been in point of fact a widespread and rather deep penetration of various marxisms into the operative and doctrinal explanations of the Church, such that Christianity is held to be mainly a social philosophy. A secondary result of this has been the relative disappearance from Catholic thinking of its own social philosophy with origins and analyses not dependent on either liberalism or socialism.

In this context, then, the first mission of the new Pope — kindly, intelligent, tough, experienced in life under marxism — is undoubtedly that of restoring doctrinal clarity and disciplinary unity to the Roman Church. *Redemptor Hominis* is evidently the initial mapping strategy for identifying and achieving these goals. We can already expect a series of judgments, decisions, reorganizations, a more careful attention to episcopal and ecclesias-

tical appointments, moves that will elaborate and complement each area from clergy, to religious life, to marriage, and on to politics.³

Behind all of this lies the distant background of the "Philosopher-Pope," the intellectual personalist, the marxist negotiator, the Thomist, the Pope who loves to hold young children and marry young couples. He comes across as a thoroughly healthy and sane man. The personal popularity of John Paul II is already a major factor in his capacity to carry out the needed clarifications. The recent *Worldview* comment on his Puebla trip is, I think, a good measure of papal strength:

At the beginning of the Puebla meeting some revolutionary priests, gathered in their own caucus, declared that they were not too concerned about what the bishops might say. As one put it: "The people who are the church are with us. So the only question is whether the bishops want to be part of the church or whether we go on without them." This bravado was much tempered, however, by the monumental outpouring of popular fervor when the pope arrived. It seemed evident the church was still very much with the bishops who were identified with bishop *Numero Uno*. After John Paul had offered his distinctions, most revolutionary proponents tried to put the best possible face on the situation, asserting that they had not in fact been repudiated. In truth, they were more admonished than repudiated. It seems likely there will be no more serious thought about revolutionary schism from the bishops.⁴

John Paul II will not be outflanked. The very fact that he went to Puebla, into the midst of what his advisors must have told him was a hornets' nest, in the very early months of his

reign, shows the moral bravery of the man. Paul VI, who had much this same courage and intelligence, was much more easily isolated. John Paul II from now on will most likely be doing most of the isolating. There will be no upstaging, I suspect, during the pontificate of John Paul II.

That the first Encyclical of this Polish Pope is precisely on "The Redeemer of Man" is no accident. All social heresy about the beginning of life and political justice eventually comes around to Christology, to the Redemption and what it means. Contemporary theological journals are full of efforts to "de-incarnationalize," as it were, Christ. Certain political options require for intellectual integrity a non-divine, non-unique Christ. Eric Mascall's reflection is worth attention in this regard:

But behind the whole of the neo-adoptionism, of which Knox, Pittenger, and Robinson are in their various ways exponents, there lies a deeply rooted assumption, which . . . is fully explicit in (John) Knox, that humanity and divinity are not only diverse in their metaphysical basis but are also radically incompatible, in such a way that if Jesus were fully and completely man, he could not also be literally and personally God. It is this assumption that I wish to deny. The insistence of these writers upon the reality and completeness of Christ's human nature is the one really strong point in their position, and it is wholly admirable. But the consequences which they claim to draw from it are, I believe, almost entirely false. Far from yielding to any Apollinarian, monophysite, or monothelite doctrine, according to which if Jesus was literally divine he would not be genuine man, I want to say that if, as I believe, the eternal God has be-



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come man, then man is what the eternal God could become; and this gives human nature a vastly nobler status than it could have in any adoptionist or quasi-adoptionist view.⁵

The effort to replace a metaphysical Christ with a social, merely human Jesus, is a very odd but accurate way of emphasizing why *Redemptor Hominis* had to be written if the papacy were to maintain any claim to its teaching office.

"The Redeemer of Man, Jesus Christ, is the center of the universe and history." Thus, from its very beginning, John Paul II set out in *Redemptor Hominis* to place the Church in the coming Second Millennium squarely within traditional doctrine.

There is to be no concession that Christianity is merely just another religion. We are not to doubt what is handed down to us in the church. John Paul's well-known "personalism" is based directly on the uniqueness of Christ, God and man.

God entered the history of humanity and, as man, became an actor in that history, one of the thousands of millions of human beings but at the same time unique! Through the Incarnation, God gave human life the dimension that he intended man to have from his first beginning; he has granted that dimension definitively — in the way that is peculiar to him alone, in keeping with his eternal love and mercy, with the full freedom of God. . . . (#5).

The theology of this statement reaffirms the much greater glory of orthodoxy about the meaning and destiny of man. John Paul seems quite clearly convinced that no alternative to Christian faith in its strict sense is really liberating to man.

Direct toward God

In a very long and profound section of *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul reaffirmed the intrinsic unity between creation and redemption (#9). The function of the Church is in all ages "to direct man's gaze . . . towards the mystery of God, to help all men to be familiar with the profundity of the redemption taking place in Christ Jesus" (#10).

The point of view of John Paul, then, is that man is radically redeemed already. This means that the position of Vatican II must be maintained — that the Church is not a political community or an institution bound to any political system. The human person has

a specific transcendence over all political orders (#13). John Paul, therefore, emphasized that the unique characteristic of Christianity is that it deals not with logical abstractions, not with "humanity" or "man," but with unique, concrete, existing persons.

Man as "willed" by God, as "chosen" by him from eternity and called, destined for grace and glory — this is "each" man, "the most concrete" man, "the most real"; this is man in all the fullness of the mystery in which he has become a sharer in Jesus Christ, the mystery in which each one of the four thousand million human beings living on our planet has become a sharer from the moment he is conceived beneath the heart of his mother (#13).

The message of this passage both from the viewpoint of life and of destiny cannot be overestimated.

Redemptor Hominis, thus, is written with the belief that Christians will only know what to say to and about the world if they are doctrinally correct about Christ and the relation of each person, from his very beginning, to the Father through him. There is a strong sense of reaffirmation here that the Church has a teaching role. Early in the Encyclical, the Holy Father addressed the climate of criticism in the Church. No longer are we so concerned about the fact of the legitimacy of much criticism. But we are concerned about its quality. ". . . Criticism too should have its just limits" (#4). John Paul feels that the Church is in a better position today and able to confront more directly "the excesses of self-criticism." This means that the Church "can be said to be more critical with regard to the various thoughtless criticisms, more resistant with re-

spect to the various 'novelties.' ”

In this regard, then, I found *Redemptor Hominis* full of gentle, firm affirmations that revealed the new pope was quite aware of the destructive theologies prevalent in the Church. He has quietly announced his ability and intention to confront them head on. This is why, later on in the Encyclical, when he came to the Magisterium and the teaching power of the Church, the Pope reminded us that “the Church thus appears before us as the social subject of responsibility for divine truth” (#19). Aquinas had noted in his *Treatise on Law* that one reason for the “necessity” of revelation was precisely the difficulty most people encounter in learning what is true, what God requires for the most important things about them. This is why the Church’s method for being truthful is fidelity to what is handed down within the Church. The admonition to the theologians, then, is not, in context, merely a pious papal exhortation:

Accordingly, close collaboration by theology with the Magisterium is indispensable. Every theologian must be particularly aware of what Christ himself stated when he said: “The word which you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.” Nobody, therefore, can make of theology as it were a simple collection of his own personal ideas, but everybody must be aware of being in close union with the mission of teaching truth for which the Church is responsible (#19).

These are not, I think, the words of a man who does not sense where the real problems might lie.

The two social themes of the Encyclical — the importance of freedom and the needs of the poor — the areas in which arguments for radical changes



in sacramental theology and priesthood have arisen, reveal that John Paul is highly sensitive to the implications of such doctrinal theories:

With all the greater reason, then, it is not permissible for us, in thought, life or action, to take away from this truly most holy Sacrament its full magnitude and its essential meaning. It is at one and the same time a Sacrifice-Sacrament, a Communion-Sacrament, and a Presence-Sacrament. And, although it is true that the Eucharist always was and must continue to be the

most profound revelation of the human brotherhood of Christ's disciples and confessors, it cannot be treated merely as an 'occasion' for manifesting this brotherhood. When celebrating the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord, the full magnitude of the divine mystery must be respected, as must the full meaning of this sacramental sign in which Christ is really present and is received, the soul is filled with grace and the pledge of future glory is given. (#20).

A veteran of many a combat, the present Holy Father knows that the social and political strength of the Church depends first upon its essential mission, that the sacraments be administered, that the word be preached. All else can be sacrificed but this. Or to put it the other way around, the public strength of the Church depends upon those things that transcend all social orders. The brotherhood is a result of the worship. It is not worship itself.

When he comes to the question of freedom and the lot of man in the world, John Paul begins with the proposition that freedom is the condition of our capacity to receive the truth of God revealed to us.

Since man's true freedom is not found in everything that the various systems and individuals see and propagate as freedom, the Church, because of her divine mission, becomes all the more the guardian of this freedom, which is the condition and basis for the human person's true dignity (#12).

And, therefore, the Pope carries on a constant polemic with those societies that prevent the exercise of man's metaphysical and moral freedoms:

Certainly the curtailment of the religious freedom of individuals and communities is not only a painful experience

but it is above all an attack on man's very dignity, independently of the religion professed or of the concept of the world which these individuals and communities have (#17).

This man did not live most of his life in Poland for nothing.

The analysis of technology and development in *Redemptor Hominis* is, in my view, perhaps less satisfactory, the part most open to ideological interpretation. The basic principles are, of course, correct, reaffirming that the ends of technology must be ruled by the ends of the person, that we need a sense of moral responsibility, that we spend too much on weapons, that too many are hungry (#16). However, this is presented rather within an analysis of what I would call "structural redistributionism," as if it were obvious that the main ills of man are solvable by a kind of static ethical approach rather than by innovative growth, by ideas that do not conceive all the world's problems as reducible to simple immorality. The Holy Father himself seems to recognize that the commonplace charges are of limited value:

We all know well that the areas of misery and hunger on our globe could have been made fertile in a short time, if the gigantic investments for armaments at the service of war and destruction had been changed into investments for food at the service of life (#16).

But the same transformation could be accomplished by a reform of the inefficiencies of socialist bureaucracies, by the reform of various restrictive religious practices in the Third World. And the comment ignores the fact that the relation of war and security is not just a simple matter of choice on the part of political leaders. The freedom

the Holy Father rightly stresses is at least to some basic extent also at issue.

Thus, on repeating these commonplaces, the Holy Father immediately added that his consideration will seem "abstract" and an occasion for partisan accusation. And this is true. This part of the document will be cited by all ideologies in their favor, no matter how contradictory. So while it is true that men can solve their problems — Christians are not ecological pessimists — still the existence of armaments, even in poor countries, is not easily reducible to only one cause, the failure to help others. Nor is the failure to develop due only to the armaments industry. I suspect that if the whole lethal industry were to disappear tomorrow, it would not necessarily follow that the lot of most men would be improved. It might even be worsened. What makes men fight is not necessarily and first arms, but rather ideas. The Holy Father, of course, knows this. This all reminds us again that the need for an authentic Christian social philosophy, one not reducible to an uneasy commingling of the so-called two-sides of liberalism and socialism, has never been greater.

We return to God

The principal burden of *Redemptor Hominis*, however, is religious. That is why the secular press did not know what to do with it except to cite the few paragraphs in it that seemed to embrace the first principle of modern secularism, that the structures of this world are all that counts as news fit to print. Like all truly Christian documents, however, the faith remains a judgment on the world, however much

we love the world and those in it. Christianity does not locate ultimate happiness within the world so that in all we do, we are ultimately about something else, about the amazement of God, that return to the destiny to which God initially fashioned us. This Encyclical ends with Mariology. Characteristically, John Paul ends with the dogmas of the faith the world thinks most unacceptable. He ends with a concrete act of a real human person, an act that makes the kind of redemption we in fact live in.

Pope turns to Mary

We can say that the mystery of the Redemption took shape beneath the heart of the Virgin of Nazareth when she pronounced her 'fiat'. . . . We feel not only the need but even a categorical imperative for great, intense and growing prayer by all the Church. Only prayer can prevent all these great succeeding tasks and difficulties from becoming a source of crisis and make them instead the occasion and, as it were, the foundation for ever more mature achievements on the People of God's march towards the Promised Land in this stage of history approaching the end of the second millennium (#22).

In reflecting on these words, on the fact that the new Pope ends with the Mother of God and prayer, it becomes clear that for John Paul II, the dogmas of Christianity, the life and practices that flow from them are, ultimately, what free and ennoble us.

Whenever we deviate from what is handed down, then, deviate in the name of a self-critical freedom, we somehow lose our freedom. The only pope who lived in the marxist form of the absolute state, only he perhaps

could see all this clearly. Our freedom is not its own end. And yet, all is done in its light.

Nowadays it is sometimes held, though wrongly, that freedom is an end in itself, that each human being is free when he makes use of freedom as he wishes, and that this must be our aim in the lives of individuals and societies. In reality, freedom is a great gift only when we know how to use it consciously for everything that is our true good. Christ teaches us that the best use of freedom is charity, which takes concrete form in self-giving and in service (#21).

Act beyond our powers

What is important about these words is the Christian realization, so often obscured by our contemporary justice language and theory, that the freedom we have is the freedom of charity, essentially of what is beyond justice. We do not first get justice, then charity is added on as a kind of superfluity. Rather we first live and act beyond our powers, in grace, in sacrifice, and only then do we achieve justice. "The best use of freedom is charity" — of such is the doctrine of the Philosopher-Pope, the Pope of freedom, the one pope who really did live in a current tyrannical regime. The first thing we would know about politics, in other words, is the transcendence of religion, the amazement of God in which we are each created, as persons. ■

Footnotes:

¹Cf. John Ford and Germain Grisez, "Contraception and the Infallibility of the Ordinary Magisterium," *Theological Studies*, June, 1978.

²Cf. the discussion of this in *LifeLetter*, #5, April 6, 1979.

³"The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith . . . has condemned a number of 'errors

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and dangerous affirmations' contained in a book entitled *Quand je dis Dieu* by a French Dominican, Fr. Jacques Pohier. The CDF mentions in particular 'denial of truth' in relation to the sacrificial and redemptive nature of the passion, aspects of the resurrection of Christ, and the final destiny of man' — all of which, it says, is 'of a kind to create uncertainty in the minds of the faithful.'" *The Tablet*, London, 14 April 1979, p. 385.

"Pope John Paul II's theological ideas have hardly been original thus far. He offers a familiar and unexceptionable form of the faith — love man, worship Christ, and obey the dictates of the Church. But his conservative social philosophy and firm views on pastoral obligations have come as a surprise and shock to Catholic liberals. They had been persuaded by the new Pope's easy and informal personal ways that he would remove some of the bitter controversies that have recently divided catholic congregations throughout the world.

"Instead, a flood of papal pronouncements has made it evident that John Paul II will not alter the Church's rigid opposition to abortion, artificial birth control, women priests and married clergymen." Jonathan Spivak, "A Pope for Our Time?" *The Wall Street Journal*, April 19, 1979.

⁴*Worldview*, April, 1979, p. 34.

⁵Eric Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, London, SPCK, 1977, p. 130.