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James V. Schall, S. J.  
Georgetown University, DC, 20057-1200

## ON “FULLY REVEALING MAN TO HIMSELF”

### *Redemptor Hominis* after Twenty-Five Years

“The Encyclical involves an anthropological interpretation in which one can perceive, in accordance with the criteria of classical theology and also of De Lubac, that the supernatural dimension must exercise not only an ascetic emotion but also a dynamic action and basis for the integral good of the subject.”

Ettore Malnati, *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 14, 2004.<sup>1</sup>

“Every theologian must be particularly aware of what Christ Himself stated when He said, >The word which you hear is not mine but the Fathers 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.”

-John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (#19), March 4, 1979.

#### I.

Twenty-five years ago, in this review, I published an essay entitled, “*Redemptor Hominis*: The Amazement of God.”<sup>2</sup> I still recall with considerable thrill reading the following graphic words of the new pope, suddenly called out of what was then the doom of the Marxist world: “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, and, perhaps even more so, “in the modern world” (#10). *Amazement* is a word I have come to love also through Plato, Pieper, Tolkien, and Chesterton, who himself saw it in St. Thomas’ love of all things. But to see it in a pope, a strange pope, was something of a confirmatory experience. He was

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<sup>1</sup>Ettore Malnati, “Set out > towards Christ, the Redeemer of man,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, English, July 14, 2004, 10.

<sup>2</sup>James V. Schall, S. J., “*Redemptor Hominis*: The Amazement of God,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, LXXX (October, 1979), 11-19.

exactly right. He was like Chesterton's man sailing into England from around the world and finally recognizing that he was home, only he never saw its real wonder before. How can we not be but *amazed* at man's dignity which we call "Good News?" Those "flat-souled" notions of man we now embrace in our culture bore us by comparison. But we don't dare to compare. The only way we can live with ourselves and not see ourselves as we are is by not considering anything else but ourselves..

That "election" of a Polish Pope still seems beyond the wildest estimate of what we would have expected from those cardinals who elevated him to the See of Peter. They were in a dire situation, of course, with the sudden and somewhat embarrassing death of the man they had just elected thirty-one days before. They seemed to have forgotten to check his medical record. Probably, as I suppose in the case of all popes, indeed of all marriages, it is not wholly the cardinals or couples who do the choosing when they in fact do the choosing. For twenty-five years, this Polish pope has been all over the world, early on singing, now limping, but still with us. He has, no doubt, met and spoken to more of our kind in all their variety than any man in history. He makes even St. Paul seem like a hermit.

As I try to read *L'Osservatore Romano* regularly, I came across the commemorative essay of Ettore Malnati to which I refer above. I had forgotten to notice the anniversary. This reminder sent me back to reread the now famous encyclical. This document is, as it were, John Paul II's initial plan of action, even manifesto. Here, in brief, is what we were to be in store for, not a little of which, and more, he has subsequently delivered a hundredfold. Neither the Church nor the world, I suspect, were prepared for the charm and depth of this Polish bishop. Instead of capitulating to the world, as many had hoped he would, he explained the world to itself. He explained man to himself. Many, though they have tried, are surprised that we cannot explain either the world or ourselves without the "Redeemer of man." From the beginning Pope Wojtyla was called "the philosopher

pope,” and so he has been. Not a few are unprepared to face the striking fact that on the Chair of Peter can sit a first class mind. It is more difficult to write off revelation when its principle spokesman likewise knows all the theoretical argument against it.

Pope Wojtyla always thought on a grander scale than most of us ever approached. This, in part, is what a pope is for. He had read the philosophers and the poets, the scientists, the novelists, and, yes, the theologians, for whom he had a word or two. He had even acted in plays and wrote some of his own. He seemed to speak every language, or at least take a stab at it. Polish looks so difficult, in fact, that if anyone can speak that tongue, he should do all right in the others. He knew about communists, Nazis, gulags, and purges in a way few politicians or academics even came close to knowing. He knew the dark side of our modern soul and, as he said from the beginning, “was not afraid.”.

What did he try to get at in this inaugural statement? As Malnati wrote, “The mystery that Pope Wojtyla is looking at is the redeeming action of the Word of God made man. To do the Father’s will for humanity’s universal salvation, the Word directs his own will and his entire activity to this end in order to stress once and for all the historicity on God’s part of the “*mysterium pietatis*.” This word, “historicity,” is the right word. The Pope wanted us to understand that this redemptive event in history happened in real time. We did not imagine it. We only can seek to date and record it, to watch what followed. The redemptive event was not intended to pass away. It explains who we are and why we are. “God entered the history of humanity and, as a man, became an actor in that history, one of the thousands of millions of human beings but at the same time Unique” (#1). “An actor in history” - that is what John Paul II himself is, an actor. Hence he could vividly understand what it might also be for Christ in his utter uniqueness to “act” in history so that what He did, when He could be seen, known by all, burned in their souls.

## II.

The pope began by situating himself in relation to his immediate predecessors. He explained his choice of name. He even noted that John Paul I was the first pope ever to take two names, an “unprecedented” step, one he, John Paul II, intended to continue. (#2). He immediately explains where he stands on questions of the Council, of collegiality, of ecumenism, of the social apostolate. He frequently cites Paul VI. This was a man who was on top of things. He did not need a short course in management before he began his pontificate.

But it is the redemption that John Paul II is here concerned with -- what is it? He sees it in an anthropological setting. “Christ, the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of His love, *fully reveals man to himself* and brings to light his most high calling.” This stressed passage from Vatican II was his constant theme. We do not know ourselves by ourselves. To know what we are, we must first listen. It is not something that we could figure out by our own techniques. Anything we came up with would be much too small for what the Father had in mind for us. A theological point lies behind this position, that is, does human nature disappear in the Godhead or is it permanent? “Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in Him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare. For, by His Incarnation, He, the Son of God, *in a certain way united Himself with each man*. He worked with human hands. He thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart” (#8). All the ancient Christological controversies are already here, but now seen terms of modern existential humanism. This “identification” with “each” man is the guarantee of our dignity. This is what this great encyclical is about.

The Pope’s next encyclical would be *Dives in misericordia*, on the Father, but it is interesting to find it already here. Clearly, “redemption” makes no sense unless we know about

creation and its origin, about why we might in fact need a “redeemer” in the first place. Christianity begins with its understanding that God is Trinity, that there is a fullness and completion in God such that nothing besides His own being is necessary. Thus, if there is something other than God, *it need not be*. The explanation of the world is already in the explanation of the inner Trinitarian life in the Godhead. “The revelation of the Father and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which stamp an indelible seal on the mystery of Redemption, explain the meaning of the cross and the death of Christ. The God of creation is revealed as the God of redemption.... His is a love that does not draw back from anything that justice requires in Him” (#9) But, as St. Thomas had already established, it is not by justice that God either creates or redeems. It is something always beyond justice, beyond a simple paying-back of what is due. Creation was not “owed.” It was a gift. This is the root of the amazement not only of God but also of our beholding His actions in the world.

What John Paul II next seeks to make clear to us is what we stand in the light of this creative, Trinitarian origin. We must understand that man does not cause himself to be, or to come to be, or to be this or that kind of thing. Rather he is outside of nothing because he is put there. He did not create himself. He is put there because he is first loved. This is at the very heart of what the pope is getting at. “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it” (#10).

The radical problems of modernity lie in the above sentence. These are the choices, the philosophies, the sins, the ideas that obscure to us what this redemptive love is in its generosity and self-giving. Our very modern “rights” philosophies, in fact, make us closed in on ourselves. We cannot be loved, we can only claim “rights” which we ourselves make from nothing and give to ourselves with no reference to anything else but ourselves. No place for love can exist in such a

system where everything is “owed” (not given) to us by someone else. The Pope repeats the now familiar theme - “the Redeemer >fully reveals man to himself.”“ If we do not know what these things mean, we simply cannot be “ourselves.”

This is the *amazement* about what we are, when it is spelled out for us. That we might know these things is, at bottom, why the Church exists. “The Church’s fundamental function in every age and particularly in ours is to direct man’s gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity towards the mystery of God, to help all men to be familiar with the profundity of the Redemption taking place in Christ Jesus.” The Church, in other words, is an institution put into the world, beyond human making, which at least gives us a chance to know what we really are. We can reject this knowing, refuse to know, but what is there to be known is present in the world through it..

At this point, the Pope takes up the vexed question of making this understanding of man known to the nations, especially to those who do not want to know and take steps to prevent any of its knowing. Certainly the Pope subsequently flew to enough places in the world to make myriads of men wonder just what did this man stand for? He speaks of “the map of the world’s religions,” which has superimposed on it “the phenomenon of atheism ... beginning (for the sake of the communists in case they are not listening) with the atheism that is programmed, organized and structured as a political system.” He leaves no doubts about whom he speaks. The Marxists, listening in astonishment, know that he knows the very depths of their own thoughts.

There is a great geo-political project behind John Paul II. Looking at an unredeemed world, he never flinched about his ambition to explain to all of it what he was about. He has made every human effort to break barriers, to talk, to find out who will listen, to overcome political obstacles so that there really can be a conversation about truth among men of every persuasion. This is no doubt

his personal charism. Vast movements in the world today are concerned about interreligious, intercultural, inter-scientific relationships and dialogues. The issue of the truth or the universal culture, that is, “what is the truth to be found in any traditional way of life?” does not disappear. Christians simply must display better unity to be included in this vital discourse (#11). Pope Wojtyla sees ecumenism as much in terms of mission as in terms of inner unity of the faith. The pope intends to find ways to address each different group that is concerned with the validity of its own explanations of reality but still is willing to listen to the additional considerations of Christian teachings.

The pope fashions his presentation under the formality of freedom. At all levels, political, economic, social, psychological, religious, and personal, the Christian teaching is seen to be a teaching about true liberty. Christianity is freely given to it, freely explained, only freely received. “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 human person’s true dignity” (#12). We should not underestimate the importance of that position. The dignity of the human person is dependent on his openness to what is the truth about himself and his free acceptance of this understanding of what he actually is.

### III.

The Church is not a rival political organization (#13). What is it about? “The Church wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ....” What is important about that sentence, I think, is how the Church differs from an “organization” or state in its point of view about to whom it is talking. “What is in question here is man in all his truth, in his full magnitude. We are not dealing with the >abstract’ man (*homo*), but the real, >concrete,’ >historical’ man. We are dealing with >each’ man, for each one is included in the mystery of the Redemption and with

each one. Christ has united Himself for ever through this mystery.” Already here, we have some of that increased attention to universal redemption and salvation that is implicit in Christianity, not for some abstract “city” but for each particular individual final destiny.

What makes the previous sentences especially important, the attention to the particularity of each actual person, including those not within any Christian fold, is the sentence that follows: “Every man comes into the world through being conceived in his mother’s womb and being born of his mother, and precisely on account of the mystery of the Redemption is entrusted to the solicitude of the Church.” In the years since the pope wrote these words, we have human individuals who are begotten outside the womb, we have surrogate mothers, and gigantic efforts to “clone” human beings. While these may not all obviate the point made in the initial observation about normal begetting, it is clear that this scientific experimentation challenges the security and even identity of our origins.

The pope next asks “what is man afraid of?” (#15). Here, he thinks, it is this very technology. “Man therefore lives in increasingly in fear. He is afraid that what he produces - not all of it.... - can radically turn against himself.” This was C. S. Lewis’ concern in *The Abolition of Man*. But the pope, following Genesis, does not use this danger as an anti-technological premise. “It was the creator’s will that man should communicate with nature as an intelligent and noble >master’ and >guardian,’ and not as a heedless >exploiter’ and >destroyer.”“ John Paul II establishes a constant theme, seen later again and again, of “the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things ..” (#16). The pope is always conscious that “abstract” answers are never enough. And the John Paul II is also quite aware that “man’s situation in the modern world” is in fact “removed from the objective demands of the moral order.” The world in which we live, culturally, has within it institutions, customs, and laws that militate against this objective order.

In this early encyclical, the pope speaks of “the consumer civilization,” a familiar theme in later writings. I have always considered this expression unfortunate. It always has a pejorative meaning in the pope’s thought. It refers to irresponsible accumulation of goods for no defensible purpose. The heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson is said, in a recent article in the *Washington Post* (July 25, 2004), to have wastefully gone through \$400 million dollars to leave himself broke. He was a real “consumer!” The word “consumer,” however, is a perfectly good word and idea in itself. It is what causes demand and lets the market know what is to be made, at what conditions, at what price. The pope too speaks negatively of profit. “The person who ... is trying to draw the maximum profit and ... is paying the price in damage and injury is always man.” Both profit and consumption can be abused, no doubt, but both, as the pope later seems to have better realized in *Centesimus Annus*, are essential elements in the only kind of going economy that can fully and freely meet everyone’s objective needs and goods in fairness.

The section on human “rights” also shows that this “rights” terminology was already in the pope’s vocabulary from the beginning (#17). He makes little effort to distinguish between modern Hobbesian or voluntarist “natural rights,” the ones we are most familiar with, and those which might be said to be rooted in St. Thomas. The term “rights” almost invariably means in current discourse “modern natural rights.” The term means whatever we will or put into effect. Such vocabulary can be confusing.

In his own use of the term, “rights,” the pope is trying to describe what is “due” to someone as a result of his dignity. The emphasis is not on the will but on that which is needed.. “The Church has always taught the duty to act for the common good and, in so doing, has likewise educated good citizens for each state.” The common good is the counter-balance to “will-rights” or “liberties” that have no further definition but themselves. These latter liberties the pope accurately describes in this

graphic manner: “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 (#21). This description of limitless freedom is pretty much what the term “rights” have come to mean in the culture.

A “right” is what is “due” to us because we freely choose, in a world absent of meaning or order, what we want. We give the meaning. Since the pope does not mean this understanding of “rights,” he is constantly being mis-understood. Modern “rights” can, within its own system, speak, for example, of a “right” to abortion. It means I do what I will. The pope cannot speak this way. Thus, when the pope speaks of “defending” rights while, at the same time, denying the “right” to abortion, say, he seems to many to be contradicting himself because of a failure to attend to the meaning of this enigmatic word, “rights.”

### III.

This encyclical is also profoundly pastoral. It is concerned with penance, the Eucharist, with the ways that the redemption is to reach each person, with Mary. A constant reminder is found of the primacy of interior transformation. “A Man is transformed inwardly by this power as the source of a new life that does not disappear and pass away but lasts to eternal life” (#18). Again we find this attention to what abides forever. It is the internal life that is the crucial arena of action and sets the direction of an individual’s being..

The essence of this interior life is the “the search for truth, the insatiable need for the good, hunger for freedom, nostalgia for the beautiful, and the voice of conscience” (#18). These are seen to be experienced movements in each individual soul. This longing for truth is what sets us on the journey to find the meaning in things. The pope, as we see later in *Veritatis Splendor* and *Fides et Ratio*, constantly returns to the question of truth. The enterprise of the very Redeemer of men is an

enterprise also of truth. It must begin in truth. Both faith and reason are paths to truth (#19). They do not contradict each other. “Being responsible for the truth also means loving it and seeking the most exact understanding of it....” It will be noticed that one objection to truth is that the human mind cannot fully express the depths of the reality to which it is open. While this is true, it does not mean that we cannot state clearly and ever more exactly what this truth is. The pope is aware of the sophism that would excuse any knowing of truth because we cannot express it all completely. We are made to speak it the best we can.

The pope does not hesitate to state that what we know from revelation is likewise a truth that we need to account for. As we have cited in the beginning, he chides theologians who give us their opinions and not what the Church teaches. This criticism of the theologians who depend only on themselves is again written against the notion in modern culture. This culture holds that what is essential is will, particularly our own will. The constant return to the question of truth is, for the pope, a return to the objective seeing of reality. “Thus, a sense of responsibility for the truth is one of the most fundamental points of encounter between the Church and each man and one of the fundamental demands determining man’s vocation in the community of the Church. The Church truly serves mankind when she regards this truth (to serve mankind) with untiring attention” (#21). The encounter, be it noted, is between the Church, that what it actually teaches about the full truth of man and”each man.” Anything that prevents this direct encounter, political, economic, religious, or cultural, is a violation of a man’s very being.

The pope’s recent encyclical on the Eucharist and the instructions on the proper saying of Mass are even seen in the distance. “The Eucharist is the center and summit of the whole of the sacramental life, through which each Christian receives the saving power of the Redemption...” (#20). The power is”received” in ritual sacrifice. Under the”sacramental sign,” Christ is”really present.”

Because of this reality of His presence,”this is the source of the duty to carry out rigorously the liturgical rules and everything that is a manifestation of community worship offered to God Himself....” Penance is simply the point at which the Redemption reaches the sinner. The pope even maintains that Christ has a”right to meet each one of us in that key moment in the soul’s life constituted by the movement of conversion and forgiveness.”

*Redemptor Hominis*, in conclusion, is addressed to a truth that results in a service based upon the understanding of those who now know what man is. He knows “the full truth about himself.” Pope Wojtyla, because of his philosophical acumen, has a most interesting way to distinguish the reality of the Church from the so-called “scientific” descriptions of her. The pope pointed out that the Council did not obtain its understanding of society from “a sociological premise.” What goes on in the Church is not sociology but redemption, which does not fall under scientific methods because of its particularity. Since the Church reaches to the core of the particular individuals being redeemed, it cannot be described merely in relational terms or terms that prescind from grace.

The Church as a human society can of course be examined and described according to the categories used by the sciences with regard to any human society. But these categories are not enough. For the whole of the community of the People of God and for each member of it what is in question is not just a specific “social membership” rather, for each and every one what is essential is a particular “vocation.”

Here again the particularity of redemption, its relation to each man in his uniqueness, is evident.

Finally, as he has always done subsequently, the pope explains the relation of Mary his topic, here, the redemption. “We can say that the mystery of the Redemption beneath the heart of the Virgin of Nazareth begins when she pronounced her >fiat”“ (#22). With such words, we can conclude by returning to the notion of “amazement.” The fact that the redemption, in all its lofty

metaphysical and theological explanations, depended upon a particular person, in a particular time and place, serves to recapitulate what John Paul II began to teach us from the beginning, how it is, finally, that what man is when fully revealed to himself.. The actual Redeemer of Man is not concerned with abstractions. He is concerned with the truth of things and what flows from it. He is concerned with whether we see our freedom as based in our own wills or in this same truth. Twenty-five years later, *Redemptor Hominis* still can amaze us.