

Rescuing *Gaudium et Spes*: The New Humanism of John Paul II

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ON AUGUST 7, 1945, the day after the world's first atomic bomb was dropped at Hiroshima, Norman Cousins wrote an impassioned editorial for *Saturday Review*, an influential American political weekly firmly anchored on the liberal side of the opinion spectrum. Entitled "Modern Man Is Obsolete," Cousins's editorial (which later became a best-selling book of the same name) gave voice to the deep anxieties of many in the early days of the Cold War: modern technology, it seemed, had produced threats to the human future to which Technological Man had few, if any, answers. As Cousins wrote, "Man stumbles fitfully into a new age of atomic energy for which he is as ill-equipped to accept its potential blessings as he is to counteract or control its present dangers."¹

On October 11, 1962, seventeen years after Cousins sounded the alarm about the obsolescence of "modern man," the Second Vatican Council formally opened. On October 15, a mere four days later, President John F. Kennedy was shown definitive photographic evidence that the Soviet Union was surreptitiously emplacing offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba, missiles whose warheads could destroy Washington, New York, and every other major city on the east coast of the United States in a matter of minutes. It has rarely been remarked that the first three weeks of Vatican II—weeks of high ecclesiastical drama in which John XXIII called the Church to a new evangelical activism in the modern world, and the Fathers of the Council sought to wrest control of the Council's agenda from the Roman Curia—coincided with the Cuban Missile

¹ Norman Cousins, "Modern Man Is Obsolete," *Saturday Review*, 12 August 1945.

Crisis: by all accounts, the closest the world ever came to a nuclear holocaust in which “modern man,” rather than being rendered obsolete, would be annihilated. Yet here was a coincidence with consequences.

That juxtaposition of the Council’s opening with the terrifying high point of the Cold War had its effects in the Church’s life in the years immediately following. The experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which threatened to preclude the work of the Council before the Council had really begun, accelerated the Holy See’s quest for a new *Ostpolitik*, which would be designed and implemented by Agostino Casaroli during the pontificate of Paul VI. The strange coincidence of a world “one minute from midnight,”² and the opening of a Council intended to create the conditions for the possibility of a new Pentecost throughout the world Church, was undoubtedly one motive behind John XXIII’s April 1963 encyclical on the imperative of peace, *Pacem in Terris*. It just as certainly formed part of the historical, even psychological, background from which emerged one of Vatican II’s most controversial documents, known during its developmental phase as *Schema XIII*.

What *Gaudium et Spes* Was Meant To Do

Schema XIII had distinguished ecclesiastical parentage: John XXIII himself; his successor, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini of Milan; and the Belgian Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens, one of the Council’s four moderators. These churchmen wanted the Council to initiate a pastoral dialogue with modernity—with “modern man,” full of confidence in his new scientific and technological powers, yet fearing his obsolescence (as that quintessential modern man, Norman Cousins, had put it in 1945). *Schema XIII* was also intended to be the model of a new style of ecclesiastical rhetoric: the rather formal (some might say, petrified) rhetoric of neo-scholastic propositions would give way to a more conversational tone, in which the Church would make respectful proposals to the “modern world,” aimed at eliciting a dialogical response from rapidly secularizing societies and cultures.

After four years of gestational travail (in which the archbishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła, played a significant role as one of many midwives), *Schema XIII* was finally born at the end of the Council’s fourth period and christened *Gaudium et Spes*. The Pastoral Constitution began with an introductory reflection on the human situation in the contemporary world, which was followed by two lengthy parts, “The Church and Man’s Vocation” (which continued the analysis of the introduction) and “Some

² The phrase comes from Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

More Urgent Problems” (which addressed a cluster of specific issues). The structural organization of this second part anticipated the teaching of John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* by describing a tripartite modern society in which politics, culture, and economics are in vigorous interaction; this scheme cleared the path in the development of Catholic social thought to John Paul II’s teaching on the free and virtuous society as one composed of a democratic polity, a free economy, and a vibrant public moral culture, with the last being crucial to the proper functioning of the other two. It is the portrait of the “modern world” running through *Gaudium et Spes* on which I wish to concentrate here, however. For in addition to analyzing specific issues, the Council Fathers highlighted what seemed to them the principal signs of the times—the chief characteristics of modernity, if you will—to which the proclamation of the Gospel had to attend.³

Gaudium et Spes is a complex document containing many enduring insights. But, read from the perspective of 2008—a mere two generations after it was written—the Pastoral Constitution also seems curiously, even

³ Throughout the world Church, the hermeneutical battles over *Gaudium et Spes* defined no small part of the post-conciliar terrain. In northern Europe, and especially in the Netherlands, *Gaudium et Spes* was read as endorsing an almost euphoric embrace of modernity. Careening through the cultural white water of “1968,” however, liberal euphoria became a kind of revolutionary zeal which, *inter alia*, emptied the Christian *kerygma* of its distinctive content—just as the European churches were being emptied of their congregants. In certain Latin American circles, on the other hand, *Gaudium et Spes* was judged a matter of bourgeois reformism from the outset. Thus the emergent theologies of liberation would dismiss *Gaudium et Spes* as hopelessly out-of-touch with their distinctive historical circumstances as they understood them. The northern Europeans, and their counterparts in “progressive” Catholicism throughout the developed world, embraced modernity and found themselves clinging to a phantom; the Latin American liberation theologians wanted nothing to do with the free economies and democratic polities of “the modern world.”

However different they may seem, these two readings of *Gaudium et Spes* each reflect, if in distinct ways, what Pope Benedict XVI has termed a conciliar “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture”: that is, Vatican II understood as a fundamental break with the Christian past and the beginning of a new ecclesial age. (See Benedict XVI, “Address to the Roman Curia,” 22 December 2005.) By contrast, Benedict proposed a “hermeneutic of reform,” which he described as one “of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us.” Genuine reform, that is, presupposes that the Church is “a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remains the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God” (*ibid.*).

The reading of *Gaudium et Spes* that follows assumes that the majority of the Council Fathers intended the Pastoral Constitution to be understood through a “hermeneutic of reform”—and then asks whether *Gaudium et Spes* properly read the “signs of the times.”

strangely, dated. *Gaudium et Spes* is a photographic still, a snapshot, of the “modern world,” and the image is true enough for that time. But what the Council Fathers describe as the “modern world” turns out to have been a modernity that would soon self-destruct because of internal tensions and contradictions the Council did not address—a modernity that would produce not obsolescent modern man living under the shadow of global nuclear war, but post-modern man. And post-modern man is beset by more, and arguably graver, dangers than Norman Cousins and the Fathers of Vatican II imagined, when they pondered a modernity imperiled by its own artifacts and bereft of satisfying answers to the questions its accomplishments raised.

There is no need here to belabor the worthy insights in *Gaudium et Spes*: the sympathetic treatment of the contemporary human quest for freedom; the dialogical approach to the challenge of modern atheism; the celebration of the genuine achievements of science and democracy; the ecclesiology of a Church that proposes, but does not impose; the touching description of conscience as “the most secret core and sanctuary of man . . . [where] he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in its depths” (§16). Above all, the Council Fathers grasped the nub of the modern dilemma and the root of the modern possibility in their focus on philosophical anthropology—the idea of the human person—as the crucial question of the day (§12). These insights remain entirely pertinent to our situation, more than two generations after the Pastoral Constitution was promulgated, and we should remain grateful for them.

Nevertheless, and in that spirit of gratitude, I would like to focus for a moment on the things that *Gaudium et Spes* did *not* see or did not anticipate, with an eye to rescuing the Pastoral Constitution from an undeserved obsolescence. For it is only when we identify these missing pieces that we can begin to understand why the challenge of post-modernity is even greater than the challenge of late modernity. And it is only from *that* understanding that we can begin to grasp why the new humanism of John Paul II—which is embedded in telegraphic form in key sections of *Gaudium et Spes*—remains essential for the rescue of the Pastoral Constitution and for the New Evangelization of the twenty-first century.

What *Gaudium et Spes* Missed

So, to put the matter bluntly, what did *Gaudium et Spes* miss in its portrait of what we now call late modernity? And what are the contemporary realities that *Gaudium et Spes* did not anticipate, but which are crucial components of the post-modern circumstance in which much of the developed world finds itself in the first years of the twenty-first century?

Gaudium et Spes recognized that a revolution in human self-understanding had followed Darwin and Freud, just as dramatic changes in our understanding of the cosmos and our place in it had followed the discoveries of Einstein and the other great twentieth-century physicists. The introductory section even suggested that humanity has, *pace* Feuerbach, passed through a “fiery brook,” on the far side of which religious conviction must be a matter of personal decision, rather than a matter of understandings and practices inherited from one’s ancestors and one’s culture. The Pastoral Constitution did not, however, take the full measure of the effects of the discovery of the DNA double-helix by James Watson and Francis Crick, and the new genetics that would follow. Thus the Pastoral Constitution did not anticipate that biology and the other life sciences would rapidly displace the hard sciences (such as physics) as the source of Promethean threats to the human future—and to man’s self-understanding.

Gaudium et Spes depicted a world in which the chief philosophical challenges to the Christian worldview and to the Christian view of man are Marxism and existentialism of the Sartrean variety (§10). Yet Marxism was in the ash can of history within a generation of the Pastoral Constitution’s promulgation, and Sartrean existentialism is studied today, if at all, as a matter of antiquarian interest. Moreover, in surveying the intellectual-cultural landscape, *Gaudium et Spes* does not seem to have discerned that another philosophical challenger, the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and his followers, would mount a more forceful challenge to the Christian view of the human person (and to the possibility of a truth-centered public moral discourse) than Sartre ever managed.

Gaudium et Spes welcomed the new roles that women were assuming throughout the world, and has important things to say about marriage and the family (cf. §§47–52). But the Pastoral Constitution does not seem to have anticipated the harder-edged forms of the new feminism that would break out into mainstream Western culture a few years after Vatican II. Nor does *Gaudium et Spes* seem to have expected the emergence of the two-worker family (in which both parents are wage-earners) and the changes that would effect in family life. Nor did the Pastoral Constitution anticipate the global plague of abortion (a practice closely linked in the West to radical feminism). Nor did it anticipate the “gay rights” movement and what would become a worldwide and historically unprecedented struggle over the very definition of marriage.

In short, *Gaudium et Spes* gave us few, if any, hints that a new gnosticism, teaching the radical plasticity of human nature, was about to hit the Western world like a cultural tsunami: a gnosticism that, married to the biotechnological revolution produced by the new genetics, proposes to

remake the human condition by manufacturing (or remanufacturing) human beings. Focused in part on the destructive capabilities of modern weaponry, *Gaudium et Spes* does not anticipate the threat to the human future embodied in the “immortality project” of the new genetics and the new biotechnologies, despite the warnings that had been raised by Aldous Huxley thirty-some years before.⁴ The Pastoral Constitution does acknowledge that “it is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence grows most acute,” and suggests that “the prolongation of biological life is unable to satisfy” the deepest desires of the human heart (cf. §18). But the Council Fathers do not seem to have anticipated that this “prolongation” was on the verge of becoming virtually infinite, a technological development with the most profound consequences for human self-understanding and for society.⁵

Gaudium et Spes sympathetically explored modern man’s crisis of religious faith, and rightly suggested that the Church’s failures must be taken into account when analyzing the roots of modern agnosticism and atheism (§§19–21). But *Gaudium et Spes* did not anticipate the demise of the secularization hypothesis: that once-taken-for-granted claim that modernization inevitably leads to secularization, which has now been empirically falsified in every part of the world except the North Atlantic community and its former colonies in Australasia. *Gaudium et Spes* does not, in other words, imagine a world that is becoming *more* religious, and in which religious conviction is having a determinative effect on world politics.⁶ Yet that is the world in which we live, a world in which, *inter alia*, radical forms of Islam like jihadism have changed the way each of us lives, works, and travels.

The Council Fathers noted that population growth was putting social, economic, and spiritual pressures on many societies and tried to respond in a pastorally sensitive way (cf. *GS* §47). But there is no hint in *Gaudium et Spes* that “overpopulation” (whatever that means, for the term is essentially undefinable) would turn out to be a myth. Nor is there any suggestion that one of the gravest problems of the twenty-first century would be a precipitous drop in fertility across the globe, led by a Europe for

⁴ Huxley’s *Brave New World* was not only remarkably prescient in anticipating the “technologization” of reproduction, decades before Watson and Crick described the structure of DNA and thus cracked the human genetic code; the British author—an atheist—correctly understood that the benign authoritarianism of the future would be based on a concept of the human condition from which any considerations of teleology were rigorously excluded.

⁵ See Leon R. Kass, “*L’Chaim* and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?” *First Things* 113 (May 2001): 17–24.

⁶ See Peter L. Berger, “Secularization Falsified,” *First Things* 180 (February 2008): 23–27.

whose lack of children a new demographic term had to be invented: “lowest low fertility.”⁷ The Council Fathers were not, of course, anti-natalist scientific charlatans like Paul Ehrlich, whose 1968 book, *The Population Bomb*, did much to popularize the “threat” of “overpopulation.”⁸ But *Gaudium et Spes* depicted a world in which too-many-people-with-too-few-resources is the norm and projected that norm into the foreseeable future; the Pastoral Constitution did not anticipate what seems likely to be the mid-twenty-first-century reality, which, in the aggregate, will be one of too few people in a world of expanding wealth.

Moreover, that wealth will be expanding because of something else that *Gaudium et Spes* did not anticipate: the silicon revolution, the rise of the Internet and other new communications media, and indeed the entire phenomenon of communications-driven “globalization.” That the world would soon become, for economic purposes, a single time-zone world in which virtually everyone is in real-time communication with everyone else, is not something a reader of *Gaudium et Spes* in 1965 would have learned (see, for example, GS §66). *Gaudium et Spes* did not anticipate that vast numbers of human beings would in fact lift themselves out of poverty in the late twentieth century, such that by the first decade of the twenty-first century some five-sixths of the world would be un-poor, or well on the way to being un-poor—while the “bottom billion” would be mired into abject poverty, in considerable part because of something else that *Gaudium et Spes* did not anticipate: the fantastic corruption and incompetence of post-colonial governments in the Third World.⁹

In light of the revolutionary upheavals of the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, and mindful of the charge (however false) that the Church of 1789 was essentially a department of the *ancien régime*, the Council Fathers recovered a Gelasian theme from the distant past of the Church’s teaching about civil authority and lifted up the legitimate autonomy of the secular in *Gaudium et Spes*.¹⁰ But the Pastoral

⁷ On why there is no such thing as “overpopulation,” see Nicholas Eberstadt, “Too Many People?” International Policy Network, July 2007, www.policynetwork.net. On depopulation, see, *inter alia*, Philip Longmann, *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What To Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

⁸ Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine, 1968).

⁹ See Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why The Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ See, for example, *Gaudium et Spes*, §36. On Pope Gelasius I’s distinction between sacred and secular authority, see John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday Image Books, 1964), 196.

Constitution did not anticipate the emergence of a radical secularism that would seek to enforce a public arena shorn of religious and moral reference points, to the point of imposing what Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger called, on April 18, 2005, the “dictatorship of relativism.”¹¹

Then there was the Council Fathers’ call for a new intellectual synthesis focused on the cultivation of wisdom: surely a worthy goal (cf. GS §56). Yet within a decade and a half, the very idea of “synthesis” in the world of learning would be displaced by theories of the inevitable fragmentation and incoherence of knowledge. Similarly, the Council Fathers had some kind things to say about modern art (in GS §62), seemingly innocent of any concern that the avant-garde might soon decay into new forms of decadence.

In terms of international affairs, *Gaudium et Spes* suggested that economic inequality would be the primary *casus belli* between nations in the future. Yet it is hard to think of very many wars caused by economic inequality or the desire to plunder resources since 1965. Rather, the world’s wars in the decades following *Gaudium et Spes* would be caused by ideological conflict and passion, ancient ethnic, racial, and tribal hatreds, and/or distorted religious conviction—aided and abetted by the failures of the United Nations (in which *Gaudium et Spes* reposed considerable confidence) and the disinclination of the former colonial powers to impose a measure of the tranquillity of order in the places they once ruled (like Rwanda and Sudan) or that were once their close neighbors (such as Yugoslavia).

Perhaps most tellingly, *Gaudium et Spes* suggested that an intellectually assertive atheism would continue to pose a particularly sharp challenge to the Church, when in fact a massive religious indifferentism—described by the Orthodox scholar David Bentley Hart as “metaphysical boredom”—would soon descend over Christianity’s European heartland like a thick, choking fog.¹² *Gaudium et Spes* anticipated the possibility of a

¹¹ This *lacuna* is all the more surprising given the important role played by Henri de Lubac, S.J., in the drafting of *Gaudium et Spes* prior to the fourth period of the Council. For de Lubac’s 1942 study, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), had ably described the intellectual origins, and anticipated many features, of the new secularism that would be unmistakably evident in post-Cold War Europe, not least in the 2003–2004 debate over the Preamble to the European Constitutional Treaty. On this point, see Joseph Weiler, *Un’Europa Cristiana: Un saggio esplorativo* (Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2003), and George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

¹² David Bentley Hart, “Religion in America: Ancient and Modern,” *The New Criterion*, March 2004: 16.

new, respectful dialogue between belief and unbelief; it did not anticipate that Catholic proposals would be received with a yawn of indifference in cultures whose deepest civilizational subsoil was once tilled by the Church. *Gaudium et Spes* argued that “atheism must be accounted among the most serious problems of this age”; yet the problem would in fact be much worse (§19). Boredom in both its spiritual and metaphysical forms—a debonair indifference to the question of God, and a stultifying lack of awe and wonder at the very mystery of being—would turn out to be a far more lethal, and far more effective, challenge to the biblical view of man than “scientific atheism” or existentialism ever was.

And the net result, in the Western world at least: not an obsolescent “modern man” of the sort imagined by both a secular analyst like Norman Cousins and the Fathers of Vatican II, but post-modern man—metaphysically indifferent, spiritually bored, demographically barren, skeptical about the human capacity to know the truth of anything with certainty, rigorously relativistic in morals, willing to impose that relativism on others through coercive state power, and determined to live according to the conviction that personal autonomy is the highest expression of the human.

Modern man may have been “obsolete” in 1945 or 1965. What came next was even worse.

The Wojtyła Solution

What, then, are we to make of these multiple failures to read accurately the signs of the times? Do they suggest a certain naivete about modernity, as Pope Benedict XVI suggested several times in his pre-papal commentary on *Gaudium et Spes*?¹³ Was the very idea of a document like *Gaudium et Spes* misbegotten, as Tracey Rowland and others in the camp of “radical orthodoxy” imply?¹⁴ Is *Gaudium et Spes* hopelessly antiquated?

Read from the vantage point of today, *Gaudium et Spes* does suffer from a kind of historical myopia. The document’s description of the key cultural challenges of “the modern world” sheds some light on the situation in the period 1945–1965; but that analysis does not anticipate,

¹³ See, for example, Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 378–93. Shortly before his election as pope, Ratzinger praised *Gaudium et Spes*’s call to a renewed sense of Christian vocation in the world in a homily at St. Peter’s Basilica: www.vatican.va/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20050318_ratzinger-gadium-spes_en.html.

¹⁴ See Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2003), and Tracey Rowland, “Reclaiming the Tradition: John Paul II as the Authentic Interpreter of Vatican II,” in *John Paul the Great: Maker of the Post-Conciliar Church*, ed. William Oddie (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 27–48.

much less describe, the end of late modernity and the rise of post-modernity that followed the flashpoint of “1968.” Yet the Pastoral Constitution’s analysis is both correct (for its time) and prescient (with reference to the impending future) on what is perhaps *the* crucial point: in both the late modern world of Vatican II and the post-modern world of today, *the anthropological question is fundamental*.

And that, interestingly enough, is the question Karol Wojtyła wished the Council to address, right from the beginning.

The first volumes of the *Acta* of Vatican II make fascinating reading, being a collection of submissions to the conciliar Ante-Preparatory Commission, which was charged with formulating an agenda for the Council and asked the world bishops, seminary faculties, and religious superiors (of men!) for ideas. Some submissions to the Ante-Preparatory Commission show genuine insight into the Church’s condition, *ad intra* and *ad extra*; they reflect a sense that a good, self-critical stock-taking, and serious pastoral reform, were in order in the Catholic Church. Other submissions, perhaps the majority, suggest that many of the world’s bishops expected a brief, virtually *pro forma* Council, focused on matters of internal ecclesiastical housekeeping: thus the bishops would come to Rome for a few months, ratify a few adjustments in Church practice, and return home by Christmas, their business done. The tensions between these two visions of what Vatican II should be were the matrix, of course, of some of the high drama in the Council’s opening weeks; as one of the curially experienced reformers among the Council Fathers, Cardinal Montini, put it to a friend on the night that John XXIII announced his intention of summoning an ecumenical council: “This holy old boy doesn’t realize what a hornet’s nest he’s stirring up.”¹⁵

Like other bishops, the young auxiliary bishop of Kraków touched on pastoral matters in his submission to the Ante-Preparatory Commission: the possibility of vernacular liturgy; a new urgency in ecumenism; the need for Christian education of the laity; a reform in the intellectual and cultural formation of priests, before and after ordination. Yet the heart of Bishop Karol Wojtyła’s response to the queries from Rome was a kind of philosophical essay. What, he asked, was the human condition today? What do people expect to hear from the Church, and what do they need to hear from the Church?

What the modern world needed, Wojtyła suggested, was an integral vision of the human person, nobler and more comprehensive than other understandings of man then on offer. The Western humanistic project, he

¹⁵ Antonio Fappani and Franco Molinari, *Giovanni Battista Montini Giovane: Documenti inediti e testimonianze* (Turin: Marietti, 1979), 171.

argued, had gone off the rails in recent centuries. Defective, truncated, even demonic ideas of human nature, human community, human origins, and human destiny were everywhere; the most lethal of those false ideas created the cultural conditions for the possibility of the civilizational catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁶ Why, Wojtyła asked, had a century that had begun with such high expectations for the human future produced two world wars, a Cold War that threatened the very survival of humanity, oceans of blood, mountains of corpses, the Gulag, Auschwitz, and the greatest persecution of Christianity in two millennia—and all between 1914 and 1960? The abattoir of the twentieth century, Bishop Wojtyła proposed, had been made possible by desperately defective ideas of who man is, which had led to distorted human aspirations and grotesque political projects.

Others knew that the anthropological question was central, Wojtyła acknowledged, even if their answers were deficient. Scientific positivists, dialectical Marxists, and literary existentialists all imagined themselves humanists; each thought that his method and his insight could lead humanity to a genuine liberation. What did the Church have to say to all of this? After two millennia, the world had questions to put to the Church: What is the Church's idea of man? What is Christian humanism? How does it differ from the many other humanisms in the modern world? Can Christian humanism answer the burning questions that naturally arise in the human heart—questions that are part and parcel of the struggles of a material creature with intense spiritual longings?

Bishop Karol Wojtyła, in other words, proposed that the entire project of Vatican II be organized around the anthropological question. The Council was meeting in the middle of a century that prided itself on its humanism. Yet humanism was manifestly in crisis, and had been for decades. The promise of salvation through ultra-mundane humanism had led to grief and slaughter, time and again; accepting the Great Commission (Mt 28:16–20) in these circumstances meant nothing less than mounting a cultural rescue operation. Thus Wojtyła suggested that the Church's central task at Vatican II was to think through a Christian anthropology adequate to the demands of Christian humanism in an age in which humanism's decay had had lethal consequences.

¹⁶ Years later, the American historian David Fromkin would agree, arguing that the corruption of intellectual culture in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Europe had played a significant role in making possible the otherwise incomprehensible, self-destructive slaughters of World War I, from which much of the rest of twentieth-century history flowed; see Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

To this task, Wojtyła brought the philosophical anthropology he had developed over two decades of reflection, teaching, and writing. Wojtyła's "new humanism" grew from three sources, and at the risk of over-simplification, its sources and main ideas can be summarized as follows.

From his readings in St. John of the Cross, Karol Wojtyła took the view that the distinctive characteristic of human existence is man's interiority, which has its roots in the origin of every being—in God. Thus for Wojtyła, modernity's "turn to the subject," properly understood, is a turn toward God. Cartesian subjectivity—at least as understood by Descartes's most influential followers, such as Hume—led only to the self. Wojtyła's concept of subjectivity was such that the "turn" need not bracket (or dismiss) the transcendent dimension, or the question of God; rather, the "turn to the subject," rightly taken, opens up the question of God.

From Thomas Aquinas, Karol Wojtyła took a realistic ontology that would secure the epistemological foundation of his new humanism. His philosophical anthropology was built on a trust in human experience, and on rationally defensible convictions about the human capacity to get at the truth of things, however incompletely. Thus it posed a challenge to the post-Kantian and (especially) post-Humean hermeneutics of suspicion, which had had such a corrosive effect on the humanistic project. From Aquinas, Wojtyła also learned that philosophical anthropology was a matter of both/and: *both* the old masters of the Western philosophical tradition *and* contemporary questions and questioners are to be in play in a Christian reflection—indeed, in any serious philosophical reflection—on the question of man. Thus Wojtyła's new humanism would reject the self-regarding "presentism" of too much contemporary thought; by contrast, the new humanism would practice the ecumenism of time. Finally, Wojtyła took from Aquinas a determination not to be reductive: the task of philosophical anthropology was to see, probe, and understand man in his full complexity. Thus the spiritual dimension of human experience must be part of any genuinely humanistic account of the human condition.

Finally, from Max Scheler and others in the early phenomenological movement, Wojtyła learned that feeling and sensibility can disclose metaphysical and moral truths—and that this, too, was part of dealing with man "in full."¹⁷

¹⁷ On these points, see Rocco Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Jarosław Kupczak, O.P., *The Human Person as Efficient Cause in the Christian Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła* (unpublished S.T.D. dissertation, John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, 1996), and *Destined for Liberty: The Human Person in the Philosophy of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America

Wojtyła deepened his exploration of philosophical anthropology in his graduate-level “Lublin Lectures” during the mid- and late-1950s. These lectures involved a trans-temporal dialogue with some of the great thinkers of the past: Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, Hume, and Scheler. (Interestingly enough, as if in anticipation of one the challenges of post-modernity cited above, Wojtyła also analyzed Bentham and utilitarianism during this period.) And if there was a focal point around which Wojtyła’s explorations in philosophical anthropology pivoted, it was the question of freedom. This was a question with a certain existential urgency, of course, given the realities of life in Poland in the immediate post-Stalin period; here, Wojtyła honed his claim that communism’s economic and political failures were based on a fundamental anthropological error. At the same time, Wojtyła sharpened his philosophical understanding of human freedom by analyzing the defects of the moral theories of Kant (deformed by a certain rationalistic reduction) and Scheler (deformed by a certain emotivist reduction). The net result was a Thomistically grounded, yet thoroughly contemporary, ontology and phenomenology of freedom that was positioned to challenge both the false humanisms of late modernity and the post-modern reduction of freedom to a matter of individualist, autonomous “choice.”

Thus for Wojtyła, a truly human freedom is “freedom for excellence” (to borrow a phrase from the moral theologian Servais Pinckaers, O.P.): freedom is a matter of freely choosing what we can know to be good, and doing so as a matter of moral habit. Against the assumptions of post-modernism (which, as Pinckaers shows, are actually rooted in an Ockhamite voluntarism), freedom is not to be understood as a free-floating faculty of choice that can legitimately attach itself to anything; this, for Wojtyła, is a dehumanizing concept of freedom. Rather, freedom is a capacity into which individuals, cultures, and societies grow. On this analysis, what post-modernity would come to call “autonomy” is in fact a prison, with bars of solipsism and locks of ignorance. Because of that, the post-modern “autonomy project” leads to both auto-enslavement at the personal level and relativism-imposed-by-authoritarianism at the societal level.¹⁸

Press, 2000); and Kenneth Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993).

¹⁸ On the Ockhamite origins of a lot of modern trouble, see Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

This rich theory of freedom is at the heart of Wojtyła's new humanism, and it is crystallized in the two most-quoted passages from *Gaudium et Spes* in the magisterium of John Paul II: *Gaudium et spes* §22 ("[I]t is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear. . . . Christ the Lord, Christ the New Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling"), and *Gaudium et spes* §24 ("[M]an can discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself"). These two passages from *Gaudium et Spes*, in which it is reasonable to speculate that Wojtyła had an authorial hand, encapsulate what Wojtyła would call, in a 1974 lecture at an international symposium on the seventh centenary of the death of Thomas Aquinas, the "Law of the Gift."¹⁹ And the Law of the Gift was at the center of the moral, indeed ontological, truth about man: we are made for freedom, which means that our lives must be lived as the gift-for-others that life itself is to each of us.

For Wojtyła-the-Christian, the ultimate ground of the Law of the Gift is the interior life of the Holy Trinity, which imprints itself *ad extra* on the human person as the *imago Dei*. Yet Wojtyła-the-philosopher was persuaded that one could get to the Law of the Gift, rationally and reasonably, through a serious reflection on human moral agency: a turn-to-the-subject that did not lead to solipsism and "autonomy," but to love and responsibility. Freedom, lived according to its proper dignity, is always freedom tethered to truth and ordered to goodness.

Pope John Paul II would develop this concept of freedom, and deepen the new humanism encoded in *Gaudium et spes* §22 and *Gaudium et spes* §24, throughout his pontificate.

Freedom for excellence, for example, is the central organizing idea of the 1991 social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, an encyclical that not only "looks back" at the heritage of post-Leonine Catholic social doctrine but also "looks ahead" to the post-modernity of the immediate future—and presciently anticipates some of the major challenges of a world in which history has clearly not ended.

John Paul II's "Theology of the Body," laid out in his Wednesday catecheses from 1979 through 1984, is perhaps the Church's most compelling response to the new gnosticism of post-modernity, and challenges post-modern man to rediscover his sacramentality and the sacramentality of the world. Not only does the Church take our human embodiedness as male and female far more seriously than post-modern gnostics, John Paul II suggests; the Church's sacramental vision of human embodiedness,

¹⁹ Karol Wojtyła, "The Personal Structure of Self-Determination," in his *Person and Community: Selected Essays* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 194.

linked to freedom-for-excellence, sheds important light on some of the most deeply controverted issues of our time.

In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul challenged the moral relativism that is central to the autonomy project by an appeal to the dignity of conscience as central to human dignity (cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, §58).

In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul challenged post-modern man to grow up: to leave the sandbox of metaphysical and epistemological skepticism and, in doing so, to break through to a new, genuinely mature humanism that would be proof against the temptations of spiritual boredom.

Then there is the new Catechism, promulgated by John Paul II in 1992 with the Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum*. The very fact of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, O.P., has pointed out, is a challenge to post-modernism's insistence on the incoherence of knowledge. Here, the Church proposes, is a comprehensive and coherent account of what we believe, how we pray, and how we think we ought to live. And with the *Catechism*, the Church proposes a question to the world: which of these two alternatives strikes you as the more deeply humane, the Church asks postmodern man—the vision of human nature and possibility we propose, or a life in which material wealth is coupled with spiritual boredom and moral insouciance?

Finally, mention should be made of the impact of John Paul II's new humanism, or personalism, on key theological themes of the pontificate: his Christology, as evidenced from the beginning in *Redemptor Hominis*; his ecclesiology and his theory of Christian mission in *Redemptoris Missio*; his sacramental theology in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* and *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*; his dialogical approach to ecumenism (*Ut Unum Sint*) and interreligious dialogue (*Redemptoris Missio*, again); his treatment of the priesthood (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*); and his theory of Catholic higher education (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*). Personalism, the new humanism, and freedom for excellence were also decisive factors in the social doctrine of John Paul II, beginning with his innovative theology of work in *Laborem Exercens*, continuing with the definition of a "right of economic initiative" in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, and culminating in his empirically sensitive treatment of the dynamics of the free economy in *Centesimus Annus*.

The Next Steps

The new humanism of John Paul II is a living thing, a growing body of thought that must be nurtured and developed by the late pope's intellectual disciples in the decades ahead, if the Church is to respond adequately to the anthropological question that lies at the heart of so many post-modern dilemmas. Such a development must reckon with some of the

serious questions that have been put to John Paul's personalism by sympathetic critics and faithful Catholics.²⁰

Granted that Wojtyła's personalist approach to a new humanism works well in promoting an integral vision of the human person, in giving content to the notion of "human dignity," in catechizing the sacraments, in unpacking questions of sexual ethics, in fostering ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, and even in explicating doctrines such as the Trinity, but does the personalist approach "work" quite as well when issues of state power are engaged? What, for example, does the new humanism have to say when international conflicts become simply intractable, and further negotiation is both futile and dangerous; does John Paul II's new humanism lead to a functional pacifism that retains the Church's tacit adherence to the just war tradition while de facto putting the Church in opposition to virtually every imaginable use of armed force? Is a dignitarian-personalist opposition to capital punishment the last word to be said on that difficult subject?

Theologians sympathetic to John Paul II's personalism have also raised concerns about its methodological effects in moral theology. Pastoral experience suggests that a personalist approach to the central teaching of *Humanae Vitae* is far more successful than the Thomistic teleology in which Paul VI framed that teaching; yet does such an approach tend, over time, to weaken the Church's sense of the ontological dimensions of the moral law? Christological and eschatological questions are also engaged: could the late Pope's stress in his magisterium on the person of the Christ, whose ministry embodies in a perfect way the Law of the Gift, lead to a kind of ecclesial forgetting of the sovereignty of the Risen Lord, who is the world's judge as well as its servant? Or, in a related matter: does the purification in Purgatory stressed by the Pope's personalism minimize the penal dimension of that purification—so beautifully expressed, for example, in elements of the funeral liturgy and in Dante's *Purgatorio*?

Grappling with these questions will not vitiate, but rather strengthen, the claim that the new humanism of John Paul II, manifest in both his philosophical and theological personalism, is a uniquely valuable resource for responding to the anthropological question which, as the Fathers of Vatican II saw, was central in parsing the human condition in the modern world. It is just as valuable a resource for the post-modern world that *Gaudium et Spes* seems not to have seen hovering just beyond the immediate horizon. The philosophical and theological anthropology of John

²⁰ On these and related points, see Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., "John Paul II and the Mystery of the Human Person," in his *Church and Society: The Laurence J. McGinley Lectures, 1988–2007* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 414–29.

Paul II, developed and refined, is thus the key to the rescue of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World from the imprisonment in the dungeon of the sixties to which some of its critics have consigned it.

N.V.