

## INTRODUCTION

John P Hittinger

In his mandate for the Pontifical Academy of St Thomas (“Inter Munera Academiaram” 1999) John Paul II bestowed upon St Thomas Aquinas the accolade of *Doctor humanitatis* and esteemed him a teacher for our time because he was ready to affirm the good or value of culture wherever it is to be found and because of his “assertions on the dignity of the human person and the use of his reason” (§4). The dual concerns for culture and the human person are rooted deeply in the intellectual and spiritual formation of Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II. HE developed a philosophy based upon St. Thomas Aquinas, but supplemented by phenomenological method, spiritual and poetic insight.

Cardinal Ratzinger captured well the uniqueness of philosophical approach in his reflection on the unity of the mission and purpose in life of John Paul II. His philosophy is distinctive because it is:

a way of thinking in dialogue with the concrete, founded on the great tradition, but always in search of confirmation in present reality. It is a form of thought that springs from an artist’s gaze and, at the same time, it is guided by a pastor’s care. . . . This comprehension of man beginning not from abstractions and theoretical principles, but seeking to grasp his reality with love, was – and remains – decisive for the Pope’s thought.<sup>1</sup>

The turn to the concrete is his way of seeking to supplement Thomism and the abstract quality of the work; his approach gravitated towards the creative role of culture and the concrete existential plight of the human person. Cardinal Ratzinger also notices the providential dimension to this philosopher polish Pope. “So it seems to me a disposition of Providence that, at this time, a ‘philosopher’ has risen to the see of Peter, a man who

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, (Benedict XVI), *My Beloved Predecessor* (Pauline Books and Media, 2007), pp. 8-9.

does not simply take his philosophy from a textbook, but exerts the effort necessary to meet the challenge of reality and of man's quest in questioning.” Cardinal Ratzinger points out that the way philosophy was presented was often through textbook Thomism. It was abstract and rote. Thus, “the form of philosophy presented in the theological schools was lacking in perceptual richness; it lacked phenomenology, and the mystical dimension was missing.” Wojtyla had a rare talent to combine the metaphysical, mystical, phenomenological, and aesthetic, and this combination would “open his eyes to the many dimensions of reality that's the source of the richness of his philosophy.”

In a very important article summarizing his philosophical work on the human person, “The Person: Subject and Community,” written in 1976, Cardinal Wojtyla explained the reason why he took his distinctive approach to philosophy in *The Acting Person*, combining phenomenology and Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>2</sup> He said, “the subjectivity of the human person is a problem of paramount philosophical importance today.” It is connected to the appreciation of human dignity. “The problem of the subjectivity of the person—particularly in relation to human community—imposes itself today as one of the central ideological issues that lie at the very basis of human praxis, morality (and thus also ethics), culture, civilization, and politics. Philosophy comes into play here in its essential function: philosophy as an expression of basic understandings and ultimate justifications. The need for such understandings and justifications always accompanies humankind in its sojourn on earth, but this need becomes especially intense in certain moments of history, namely, in moments of great crisis and confrontation.” The idea that philosophy offers “basic understandings and ultimate justifications” lends itself

---

<sup>2</sup> Wojtyla, Karol/John Paul II. *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, Catholic Thought from Lublin, (New York: P. Lang, 1993): 219-261. See also *Gift and Mystery*, pp. 93-95.

to the interest in the cultural expression of thought and providing fundamental principles or reference points for understanding human existence and the dignity of the person.

From the experience of Poland, Cardinal Wojtyla spoke about the crisis in terms of the confrontation with a materialistic interpretation of life, having at its disposal such powerful means of indoctrination and social and cultural control. At the root of the controversy was the question of the human person: “the truth about the human being has a privileged place in the whole process.” Neither cosmology nor philosophy of nature was as central to the cultural role of philosophy as was philosophical anthropology. His turn to phenomenology was motivated by his desire to enrich the truth of Thomistic philosophy so as to offer the best defense of the “irreducible” in man and to highlight the dignity of the person.<sup>3</sup> In the *Acting Person* Wojtyla leads the reader to the rediscovery of conscience against the degradation of materialism of totalitarian ideology, and subsequently the degradation of liberal reductionism and cultural deformations of the west. Dedication to truth, moral truthfulness, is the highest achievement of the person. His concern for “the acting person,” as he says, equipped him to do battle with Marxism, but his great insights were derived his deep personal interest in man and his education in the philosophy of Aristotle and St. Thomas. This initial seed burgeoned into a personal “mission” when Wojtyla found his calling. In describing his own calling, John Paul writes that “when I discovered my priestly vocation, man became the *central theme of my pastoral work*.”<sup>4</sup>

In the *Acting Person* Wojtyla explained that philosophers must do more than erect theories upon theories, meta-theories as we call them today, but rather the philosopher

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 210-213

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery: On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination Memories* (Doubleday Image, 1996).

should “face the major issues themselves concerning life, nature, and the existence of the human being . . . directly as they present themselves to man” (vii). In opposition to Descartes and modern philosophy, he suggests that action is a better way into anthropology than reflective consciousness. He states that his prime objective is “the understanding of the human person for the sake of the person himself; to respond to that challenge that is posed by the experience of man as well as by the existential problems of man in the contemporary world.”<sup>5</sup> (22)

In short, his strategy is to emphasize philosophical anthropology, and use phenomenological methods, in order to offer fresh discovery of the truth of Thomistic philosophy of the human person as a spiritual being with powers of intellect and will, fulfilled by truth and love. He opens a way for appreciation of conscience and the rediscovery of God. In *Redemptor hominis* he proclaims that man is the way of the Church. Thus, in *Fides et Ratio* he praises modern philosophy for “the great merit of focusing attention upon man.” From this starting-point, human reason with its many questions has developed further its yearning to know more and to know it ever more deeply. §5

Pope John Paul II later reformulates the account of the crisis of our time as a “crisis of meaning,” *Fides et Ratio* §81. The crisis runs deeper and is broader than Marxist materialism. It arises from the fragmentation of knowledge (§81); specialization (§56); the “wilting” of reason under the weight of infinite tasks and mind-numbing details (§5); the constrictions of technological thinking (§15). So again we must ask, how does one generate or recover the passion for truth? How do we call forth the desire for truth, for the whole

---

<sup>5</sup> Karol Wojtyła and Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *The Acting Person* in *Analecta Husserliana*. (Dordrecht; Boston: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1979), p. 22.

truth, to dare to rise to truth of being? How do we activate or re-activate the desire to know the “whole truth about man”?

We find a variety of strategies in the work of Saint John Paul II. These include (i) reconnecting philosophy to everyday life and common human issues. He sees the continuity between philosophy and the fundamental questions about human existence arising from everyday life and asked by common people in all cultures as John Paul II indicates in the very opening sections of *Fides et ratio*. Alasdair MacIntyre pursues this theme in his analysis of *Fides et ratio*.<sup>6</sup>

(ii) John Paul II show an appreciation of tradition, community, and dialogue in the exercise of intellectual inquiry, suggesting an affinity with the work of MacIntyre on the role of traditions in inquiry (*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* and *Whose Justice, Which Rationality*). John Paul II makes the case in *Fides* that a community also assists in forming the disposition to truth seeking. For example in section 33 he wrote that truth is “attained not only by way of reason but also through trusting acquiescence to other persons who can guarantee the authenticity and certainty of the truth itself. . . . It must not be forgotten that reason too needs to be sustained in all its searching by trusting dialogue and sincere friendship.”

(iii) The understanding of the human person in action is what explains his emphasis upon philosophical anthropology, and his use phenomenological methods, in order to offer fresh discovery and affirmation of the truth of Thomistic philosophy of the human person as a rational animal, with spiritual powers of intellect and will, fulfilled by truth and love. His

---

<sup>6</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, “Philosophy recalled to its tasks: a Thomistic reading of *Fides et Ratio*,” *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays* Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 179-196

turn to phenomenology was motivated by his desire to enrich the truth of Thomistic philosophy so as to offer the best defense of the “irreducible” in man and to highlight the dignity of the person.<sup>7</sup> In the *Acting Person* Wojtyla leads the reader to the rediscovery of conscience against the degradation of materialism of totalitarian ideology, and subsequently the degradation of the reductionism and cultural deformations of the western liberal society. Dedication to truth, moral truthfulness, is the highest achievement of the acting person. In a speech given in New Orleans, 1987, John Paul II explained that there is a mutual discovery of the person and God: “Today there exists an increasingly evident need for philosophical reflection concerning the truth about the human person. A metaphysical approach is needed as an antidote to intellectual and moral relativism. But what is required even more is fidelity to the word of God, to ensure that human progress takes into account the entire revealed truth of the eternal act of love in which the universe and especially the human person acquire ultimate meaning. The more one seeks to unravel the mystery of the human person, the more open one becomes to the mystery of transcendence. The more deeply one penetrates the divine mystery, the more one discovers the true greatness and dignity of human beings.”

(iv) The exploration of the ethical challenges of modern technology and social organization is crucial because “the immense expansion of humanity's technical capability demands a renewed and sharpened sense of ultimate values. If this technology is not ordered to something greater than a merely utilitarian end, then it could soon prove inhuman and even become potential destroyer of the human race” (§81). The modern aspiration for freedom, for community, and for meaning require an authentic philosophy, a philosophy springing

---

<sup>7</sup> Karol Wojtyla, *Person and community*, pp. 210-213.

from the original vocation of the love of truth and the truth of the good, and ultimately a philosophy consonant with the word of God. His work as an advocate of the culture of life, and the protection of the dignity of the person all spring from the modern challenge of technology and can give rise to the earnest seeking of the whole truth about man.

(v) The embrace of faith and its integration with reason is central to the philosophy of the human person. It is a central claim of *Fides et ratio* that a lively and well formed faith is one of the best ways to generate and recover the original vocation of philosophy. For example, revelation “has set within history a point of reference” (§14). Those reference points are absent from culture today, and yet although shrouded in mystery, they represent a universal and ultimate truth. The intelligible mystery “stirs the mind to ceaseless effort.” Revelation is a “lodestar” against the immanentist habit of mind, lifting up the heart and mind to something greater. The mutual influence, the cooperation of faith and reason in this enterprise is of course paramount to the teaching of the encyclical: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.” The Truth of Christ “holds out to theology and philosophy alike the prospect of support, stimulation and increase (cf. *Eph* 4:15)” (§92).<sup>8</sup>

The teaching of Vatican II provided Pope John Paul II with a confident and dynamic agenda for his pontificate.<sup>9</sup> In two of the passages in *Fides et ratio* (§§13 and 60) we find a reference to *Gaudium et spes* §22 as providing a key to anthropology and the answer to human vocation or calling. John Paul II looks to Christ for the true measure of man and

---

<sup>8</sup> “Veritas, quae Christus est, ubique auctoritate universali se imponit quae gubernat, incitat et prosperat tum theologiam tum etiam philosophiam.” *Fides et ratio* §92

<sup>9</sup> He said that “the Second Vatican Council has been a gift of the Spirit to his Church. For this reason it remains a fundamental event for understanding the Church's history at this end of the century . . . and it was possible to note how the patrimony of 2,000 years of faith has been preserved in its original authenticity.” February 27, 2000.

finds in his life and teaching a truth “profoundly significant for philosophy.” The confidence is lacking in the search for truth today and yet the searching, the “journey of discovery” must harbor some hope of fulfillment. Thus, “faith comes to meet them offering the concrete possibility of reaching the goal.” (§33) We are offered a call to the fullness of truth, which offers a hope for renewal for any particular culture (§71). The vocation of the human person is ultimately to know and to love God. §107<sup>10</sup>

Saint John Paul II’s mandate to the Pontifical Academy of St Thomas (*Inter Munera Academicarum*) takes on greater meaning and urgency when we consider his strategies for the renewal of humanity. Cardinal Wojtyla as a philosopher ceaselessly pondered the question “what is man?” In his encyclical *Redemptor hominis* Pope John Paul II proclaimed that man is the way of the church. Therefore, his designation of St Thomas Aquinas as doctor of humanity indicates his esteem and preference for the philosophy of St. Thomas in the renewal of philosophy in our day. The philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas seeks out the truth about the human person, the true human good, and the relationship to the divine. These papers from our conference entitled *Thomas Aquinas: Teacher of Humanity* explore the significance for the 21st century of Thomas Aquinas’ teaching on humanity. They explore such questions as “is it still meaningful to talk about ‘humanity’ or ‘inhumanity’?” “What challenges do evolution, eugenics, and the trans-humanist movement present for a concept of ‘humanity’?” “Is the ‘human’ a viable standard in a world with many cultures and traditions”? Throughout the explorations one finds the spirit of St. Thomas at work

---

<sup>10</sup> See John Hittinger. *The Vocation of the Catholic Philosopher: From Maritain to John Paul II*. Washington, D.C.: American Maritain Association: Distributed by the Catholic University of America Press, 2010.

seeking to understand the full truth of being as well as the boldness of John Paul II seeking to understand human in the concrete challenges of the modern age.