

MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN PAUL II

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The vision of the family that John Paul II brought to Rome was not born from thoughts that he developed sitting at a table. Every vision arises in man to the extent that he dwells in the experience of reality and contemplates it, lives it, even enjoys it, identifying with it. The philosophers that constructed their philosophy on the so-called third degree of abstraction, from which even quantity had been expelled, no longer spoke of what individuates beings; ultimately they debated about nothing but logical patterns, which would be as useful as sharp knives in a shop without meat. Such abstract philosophies were even afraid of the vision of reality, above all that of man; it confounded them, disturbing their patterns of thought. Vision is always prophetic. When it is missing, i.e. when revelation is missing, man and society degrade, because they live in a frenzied way (cf. Prov. 29:18).

Karol Wojtyła was surrounded by philosophies of this kind when he himself began to think philosophically. He felt a little like one who sees the road and walks along it, but is criticized by those who don't see it, because they only look at their own constructions. Therefore, the environment in which he had come to find himself did not accept him favorably. For the poets he could not be a good poet, because he was a philosopher; and for the philosophers he could not be a good philosopher, because he was a poet. Neither intellectual poetry, nor poetic philosophy, were much

appreciated. True, there were some old sages who understood him thanks to their experience of life, and many youth who, desiring to live reasonably and well, ultimately took to this priest who, like them, loved human love and desired to love, seeing that these youth sought to be present to each other like epiphanies of beauty, which, like in the flower, show forth the true and the good from above.

The intellectual atmosphere, in which Karol Wojtyła began to philosophize, consisted on the one side of the academics trained on the manuals that commented on the commentaries of St. Thomas Aquinas; and on the other side of the “academics” who repeated the latest enunciations of the First Secretary of the Communist Party. All these academics, formed in a way analogous to the rationalism proper to the Enlightenment, reduced the contents of their subject to sterile schemes, for fear that they had perhaps to *speak* of human love in their philosophies, let alone contemplate it. For the Marxists, to speak of love, and therefore of liberty, was politically dangerous; it could bring down their system. Our academics, on the other hand, were afraid of being placed among the new modernists, however they were supposed to make a living. At this point their thought did not even dare to touch the mysterious reality of the human person. Love and liberty made them tremble. Consequently, the youth came to the sacrament of matrimony unprepared. In

the 50's, speaking of precisely these problems with the pastor of my village, I heard him say to me: "In this village fifty percent of the marriages are probably not valid. However, I don't say it, because I believe that God is good and powerful enough to be able to purify them and render them valid with the passage of time. We all mature on our own with the help of God."

John Paul II had to face a third kind of academic, the so-called modern thinkers who were incapable of robust thought. Uprooted by the metaphysics of the Enlightenment – uprooted, that is, from the True and the Good in which Earth is united with Heaven and the Transcendent and time with eternity – they thought they could and must create new worlds according to their desires, following only the rules of mathematical logic. I say all this with reference to the situation of time past, because today, it seems to me, we already see a new day dawning, in which the ancient things make the new things grow.

The vision of the family born in the thought and in the heart, that is in the person, of Blessed John Paul II collided, then, not only with the lack of a vision of the family in the academic environment, but also with an aggressive construction of new forms of family life further and further from the truth of the human person, and with an equally aggressive imposition of these forms on the society by small but noisy groups.

Therefore the Pope, loving human love as it is found in marriage and family, felt continuously called to pose the question, "Who is man as a person?" This question is at the center of his thought and of his poetic philosophizing. He felt called to teach the youth to pose this question, and not in an abstract and artificial way. Thus formulated, this question already contains the response; to the questions constructed by man, it is man who constructs the responses. The Pope found the response to the question of who man is in the experience of his own person and of others, in the experience of love that united these persons, and in it also united his person with them. He walked together with others toward the truth of the human person, and with them awaited the revelation of this truth. He loved men and was loved by them.

The question "Who is man?" arises first of all in the encounter between woman

and man. Posed only in the encounter of persons of the same sex, this question will end in responses that will only be sexual tautologies. Tautologies do not say anything but themselves. They do not lead to others and, consequently, they do not lead to the Other, to God. It is the sexual difference that opens the human-divine road for men. Those who dwell in tautologies risk living troubled in their bodies, minds, and psyches; and ultimately, they risk misdirecting their spirit, which means estranging themselves from their own personal identity. Whoever does not know his own identity, places himself outside of dialogue and, therefore, outside of the communion of persons – *extra ecclesiam*.

Don Karol Wojtyła first of all taught the youth to understand what it means to question, because he who does not know how to question does not even know how to think. His thinking will only be an imitation of thinking. It is here that I see the reason why modern society lives in a way, if I can put it this way, unthinkingly. Modern society does not think, because it does not know how to question, seek, and wait for the truth. Socrates would have said that the members of such a society live dissolutely like those birds called plovers that, being so voracious, consume food in excessive quantities and therefore must be equipped of large orifices.

Modern man confuses questioning with putting everything in doubt. Therefore he knows only one response – the negation of everything. Consequently, he lives as he wishes and not as he should live, because he thinks he does not belong to anything or to anyone.

Modern society does not know dialogue, because its members do not know how to question and await the answer. Consequently they do not know the gift that is the response. For them it is not necessary to live in the encounter with others. Each one thinks he is self-sufficient. He does not seek to be a gift, because he is convinced that the others do not need him. Encounters are pursued only for convenience or pleasure. It does not occur to us that dialogue, if it is not an exchange of gifts, of the persons themselves, is nothing but exploitation and even prostitution. Not knowing the gift, and therefore not being present to each other, those who compose modern society must struggle to survive in

solitude. In solitude it is not gift, but rather conflict, that constitutes the principle of social life. In such a society politics, starting from marriage and the family, consists in knowing how to make an alliance of two against a third.

John Paul II tirelessly repeated that the salvation of the person is found only in the person. The person saves the person. It is with the help of the other person that the person can know and accept himself. Actions and words, in which the person is present as a gift for other persons, reveal to each the way that leads to truth, and to the good called the "common good". Acts, said Wojtyła, are epiphanies of the person (*The Acting Person*). Empty acts, acts that are not words, are lies used to seduce. In them the Word [Logos] is missing. Therefore they are a-logical. You can read them as you wish. It is enough to listen to the speeches of politicians and try to understand them. Their a-logical character is a consequence of the negation of the truth and of the good, which are the fruit of encounter and of the union of the Earth (*Gaia*) with Heaven (*Uranus*). Where the horizon is missing, the cosmic de-fin-ition of reality is missing, and every order (*cosmos*) is legitimate.

Modern man sees everything as means, to be used and discarded. He even sees others and himself in this way. He does not desire anything that is not to be possessed. He needs objects and seeks to have them. The presence of objects does not reveal the truth of man; does not indicate his good; does not awaken love and liberty.

Precisely for this reason modern man is unable, not only to unite himself in matrimony and to create the family, but even to form friendships. All that he is able to do is reduced to knowing how to enter into a kind limited liability company, to produce objects to sell and buy. He even dares to produce men.

Faced with the situation of man in such a society, John Paul II desired to revive evangelization, that is to make the presence of Christ in marriage and the family more ardent. He spoke of the new evangelization, but the adjective "new" does not add anything to the substantive "evangelization". He thought of the dialogue in which Christ, explained to Nicodemus the meaning of "being reborn from above" (Jn 3:3), when the "teacher in Israel" did not know how it could happen. Christ says: "God in fact so loved the world

to give his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him may not die, but may have life eternal... Whoever does the truth comes to the light, so that it appears clearly that his works have been done in God" (Jn 3:16, 21). Nicodemus matured into the truth and liberty in the course of the years of the apostolic work of Christ. Eventually he found them again, stopping under the cross and then, with Joseph of Arimathea, placing the body of Christ in the sepulcher that a little later would remain empty. For Nicodemus the Word heard at night from Jesus (cf. Jn 3:1–21) was the same as that nailed to the cross and then placed in the tomb. Only he, Nicodemus, was renewed, or better, reborn.

One day someone asked John Paul II which verse he would choose, if the Sacred Scripture had to be destroyed and he could save only one verse of the sacred Text. He responded: "Save this: 'You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free'" (Jn 8:32).

Truth is a gift and the gift is received on the condition that it is revealed. Where is it revealed, this truth that sets man free? To the question: *Quid sit veritas?* (What is truth?), the ancient epigram responds: *Veritas est vir qui adest* (The truth is the person present – *ad-est* – to another person). Truth reveals itself and gives itself to men in dialogue in which they are present to each other, that is to men who give themselves totally to each other, or in other words – who reveal themselves. We find this presence first of all in marriage and the family – it testifies to God in the act of creation of every human person. Husband and wife should say to each other every day: *Ad-sum!* I am present for you; I am oriented toward you! Oriented to you, I am oriented to God (cf. *Fecisti nos ad Te, Domine* – You have made us oriented to You, Lord).

How to begin the new evangelization?
C. K. Norwid wrote:

"The attentive care for one day, the
brave for an age,
The 'learned', instead, as always, have
formed a committee."

(„Baczni o dzień, a mężni troskali się
o wiek,
Uczeni zaś, jak zwykle, złożyli
komitet.”)

Fortunately “God does not cease to work. His essential work always remains the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ” – we read in the book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. The Church that is born in the new evangelization, and is new every day, is identified not with the problems to resolve in committees, but with

that mystery that from the cross and from the empty tomb radiates truth and goodness. The time that is to be lived under the cross and on the way that leads to the empty tomb is not a time to found committees, but to make oneself present to the other, which happens first of all in marriage and the family.

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