



Solidarity and the Influence of John Paul II

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The election of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II in October 1978 came as a surprise to the world but for those who had known him this was only a confirmation of the qualities of this extraordinary man. A student of Polish language, actor of a clandestine theater in German-occupied Poland, a quarry worker, village priest, professor of theology, bishop in Communist Poland struggling for human souls and church buildings against the totalitarian regime, he was the man who would change the face of the Catholic Church and its place in the contemporary world. His early life was marked by the death of his family, first of his mother, then of his little sister and senior brother, and finally, during the Nazi occupation, of his father. It was above all the strength of his faith made him develop his extraordinary skills against all odds, first under Nazism and then under long decades of Communist rule.

The decision of the 1978 *conclave* drew the world attention to Poland. Most media wondered at the election of the pope from a country captured by communism, situated behind the Iron Curtain, full of bizarre sounding names, isolated and mostly ignored, whose difficult history was too difficult to understand, especially that it was usually presented under the influence of Poland's oppressors.

No wonder that on the night of 16 October 1978 the Poles went euphoric. It was, as someone said, "the first smile of history for Poland" in two generations. Crowds gathered in the streets, strangers kissed and hugged each other in tears of happiness. Pope John Paul II immediately became a national hero but also an obligation, a reminder of the sources of hope and strength. This was made particularly clear when he returned to Poland in 1979 on his first pilgrimage as the pope. The words that he spoke during the Warsaw Holy Mass on 2 June will always be remembered as a new beginning in Polish history: "Let Thy Spirit descend! Let Thy Spirit descend and renew the face of the land. This Land." Nine days later the pope bid farewell in his hometown Cracow, saying: "Before I leave, I beg of you (...) do not cut the roots that we all grow from"¹. The Communists had been doing their best to cut these roots but failed. New shoots of faith, hope and love began to grow. When millions of Poles, who came to see their pope, saw they were so many, things could no longer have been as before. After decades of the Communist limbo, the Polish civil society was being reborn.

John Paul II reminded the Poles of their roots but also unveiled the truth that communism is just an episode in a thousand-year history of Christianity in Poland. His message was like a sacrament of historical confirmation of the nation. He reminded everyone of the unique dignity of the human being, awakening the deepest conviction that everyone is free in his or her dignity as a God's child². People treated as slaves learn to behave like slaves. But when they realize their dignity, they discover that they are free and responsible, that they are,

¹ Jan Paweł II. *Pielgrzymki do ojczyzny*, (Kraków: „Znak”, 2005), p. 205.

² Zbigniew Stawrowski, „Jan Paweł II a 'Solidarność'”, *Teologia Polityczna*, 2006, Vol. 3.

according to Arthur O'Shaughnessy, not only "the music-makers" and "dreamers of dreams" but also "the movers and the shakers" of this world.

The general strike in the Baltic Coast in the summer of 1980, supported by millions of other Polish workers was the first stone that caused an avalanche which ultimately swept the Berlin Wall. Those who took part in these strikes and later became members of the "Solidarity" trade movement were from the beginning inspired by the feeling that what mattered was not just material conditions of life. This was a massive protest against humiliation, against violation of human dignity, against intimidation and overwhelming lies. And this movement was clearly influenced by the papal teaching. John Paul II was fully aware of his impact.

But, as Zbigniew Stawrowski rightly points out, the pope owed something to "Solidarity" as well. This movement materialized an idea. The idea of solidarity was, of course, not entirely new, both in the Catholic doctrine and in social movements. About a century earlier there was even a small trade union in Poland called "Solidarity", now long forgotten. As if stimulating this idea, in his encyclical *Redemptor hominis* of March 1979 John Paul II stressed solidarity and responsibility for the whole community as a prerequisite of the Christian participation in the royal dignity of Jesus Christ³ who had clearly stated: "Whatever you have done to one of those poorest, you have done to me"⁴. John Paul II referred to this idea many times during his 1979 pilgrimage to Poland.

When the "Solidarity" came into being in September 1980, John Paul II became a true patron and promoter of the Polish free trade movement. He received many of its top leaders, including Lech Wałęsa, but most of all he supplied it with his extraordinary spiritual strength. He also suffered from the attempt on his life in May 1981, that was closely connected with his impact on the Polish reality, on the Communist bloc, and on international relations. Whoever was behind Ali Agca, and there are reasons to assume that it was the Soviet KGB, was fully aware of this impact.

"Solidarity" was not only a historical breakthrough but also a problem for the world and for the union itself. The logics of the Polish "self-limiting revolution" within the Soviet bloc posed serious threats of either going too far or losing the primary moral strength in political struggles. This is why the Pope constantly stressed the fundamental meaning of solidarity in the light of the Christian doctrine. In his subsequent encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* of November 1980 he reminded the words of the prayer "and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" and St. Paul's appeal that each and every carry the burden of the other⁵.

His fundamental encyclical dealing with social problems, *Laborem exercens*, published in September 1981, was a great appeal for the respect of the dignity of human labor, stemming from the dignity of the human being. The pope criticized both the abuses of liberal "economism" and Marxist collectivism, stating that in both cases priority of the human person before capital is violated. Chapter 8 of this encyclical was entitled "Solidarity of the working people" and its Part Four clearly supported the Polish movement. John Paul II discussed here the right of the employees to receive fair pay, social security, and to create free trade organizations. The pope pointed at the necessity of substituting the idea of "struggle" by the idea of "solidarity". Since the trade activities overlapped with politics, he defined the latter as

³ *Redemptor hominis*, 21.

⁴ Mt., 25, 40.

⁵ *Dives in Misericordia*, 14.

a “well-advised concern about the common good”. For many political scholars, used to defining politics in terms of conflict and struggle, this must have come as a surprise.

When the Polish Communist authorities introduced martial law in December 1981, trying to crush the “Solidarity” movement, John Paul II left no doubts about his standpoint. But his position was very delicate. He fully realized how easy it would be to spur emotions and to lead the Poles into the unpredictable. Thence he appealed to the “Solidarity” leaders for calm, but at the same he demanded from the Communist authorities dialogue with the workers and respect for the basic human rights. This was in particular his message to General Wojciech Jaruzelski and his clique during the second pilgrimage to Poland in June 1983⁶.

As the papal demands fell of the deaf ears of the Jaruzelski junta, John Paul II consistently worked on the saving of hope. In his Częstochowa homily he reflected on the Jasna Góra appeal to the Holy Virgin Mary, commenting the words “to be vigilant”. “What does it mean to be vigilant? He asked, “it means that I try to be a man of conscience. That I do not jam and do not deform conscience. I call good and evil by their proper names and do not blur them”. He also asked the Poles to “demand from yourselves even if others would not demand from you”. During his visit to Niepokalanów, referring to the martyr’s death of St. Maximilian Kolbe in a Nazi death camp, he appealed: “Let no evil defeat you, but defeat evil with goodness”⁷. This program was soon proved to be very difficult by the brutal murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko by three Communist security agents in October 1984.

The 1983 pilgrimage was perhaps one of the most difficult for the pope. The martial law authorities planned to use it as a proof of “normalization”, so John Paul II had to evade this trap. At the same, the international situation was not ripe for another outburst in Poland, so he had to keep emotions under control. He managed to do both, reaching to the fundamental truth of Christianity and “Solidarity”. He pointed out that during the years 1980-81 Poland witnessed a bloodless revolution, alluding to the absurd bloodshed during the martial law. He also referred to the right of association, stressing that it is not given by any authority, but an inborn right of a human being⁸. No wonder then that this statement infuriated the Communists.

When John Paul II came to Poland again in 1987, the atmosphere was already different. Unable to either intimidate or corrupt the Polish society, the Communists were already seeking his aid in encouraging the Poles to believe in reforms. The problem was that only few Poles noticed any reforms. Nevertheless, the hope survived and John Paul II came as a “herald of the coming spring of nations”⁹. When he could finally come to Gdańsk, the cradle of “Solidarity”, he referred to the sense of solidarity again. “What does it mean “solidarity”?” he asked. “It means a way of living of a human community, for instance a nation, in unity, but with due respect for all differences (...), a way of living in unity of human dignity”. Talking to the youth in Gdansk he also said: “Struggle must not prevail solidarity”¹⁰, as if encouraging the coming peaceful transformation.

In his second social encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei Socialis* of December 1987, John Paul II referred to the idea of solidarity in the economic and international sense. He mentioned the

⁶ Jan Paweł II. *Pielgrzymki do ojczyzny*, p. 223-225.

⁷ Ibid, p. 263-264.

⁸ Ibid, p. 331.

⁹ Stawrowski, p. 11.

¹⁰ Jan Paweł II. *Pielgrzymki do ojczyzny*, p. 470 and 492-494.

interdependence of all nations and all social strata and demanded solidarity and responsibility of the strong for the weak.

When the walls came down and “Solidarity” paved the way for the fall of communism in East Central Europe, John Paul II could have felt satisfaction that he largely contributed to this historical change. Instead he addressed new challenges for the transforming post-Communist systems in Poland and elsewhere in the region. In his third social encyclical, *Centisimus annus*, he returned to the idea of solidarity as a basic constituent premise of the Christian version of the social and political organization. He repeated his teaching on solidarity during his pilgrimage to Poland in June 1999. He referred to the obligation of the more fortunate western countries to show solidarity and render aid to the reforming post-Communist countries. Addressing Polish home problems, such as unemployment and egoistic “wild” capitalism, he said: “I heard from you in Gdansk ‘there is no freedom without “Solidarity”. Today I should say ‘there is no solidarity without love’¹¹. And this is perhaps the essence of his teaching, at the heart of which there was always the basic conviction that God not only demands but also loves.

What is left of John Paul II’s legacy? It is not yet closed. Someone said that John Paul II was, is, and will always be. One of the amazing aspects of his pontificate was his ability to communicate. Journalists covered his pilgrimages and wondered at the crowds that surrounded him everywhere he went. The pope was omnipresent in the media but, attempting to stay religiously neutral, the journalists were usually ignoring the real sources of his strength. This strength came from the words that he spoke to the millions, words that were hardly heard in mass media. John Paul II made people feel the existence of something much deeper than they experienced in everyday life. He allowed people to see beyond “here and now”. To those who mainly focused on his ailing health he had an opposite message. He was always younger than those who wasted their life not knowing what it means to love. He was younger than those who considered his health problems instead of listening to his message. He was always younger because he knew how to make use of time and how to share his hope with the people.

For 27 years we witnessed extraordinary things. In the hopeless years of the Cold War, this Slavic Pope came as a sign. He has led the Poles out of enslavement, he has broken the Iron Curtain, he has encouraged hundreds of millions of people worldwide to believe that God in love, that human beings dispose of an inborn dignity, that they should stand for it and work together and not one against the other. He encouraged people to open their ears to hear God. We have witnessed the life and death of a prophet.

His faith stemmed from the conviction that life is a gift. Each life. And thence, life is an obligation and must be seen from the point of view of eternity.

This world is drowning in noise and confusion, since men seem to believe they create themselves and all their standards. Czesław Miłosz once wrote:

“In the fog the Golden Calf shines over cities,
Helpless crowds run to offer sacrifice
Of their children to blood-covered altars of the Moloch”¹².

¹¹ Ibid., p. 1019.

¹² Czesław Miłosz, „Oda na osiemdziesiąte urodziny Jana Pawła II” from the volume *To*, (Kraków: „Znak”, 2000).

Is it not the noise made by those who favor killing for comfort, who struggle for human rights but deny any human nature, who produce fog by their mass-circulation nonsense, such as “The Da Vinci Code”, who demand a God who would allow anything, a Moloch? From time to time true God send us a prophet. But those who shut their eyes and ears, who can help them? They can wait for another prophet, but will they live long enough?