

AT THE SOURCES OF JOHN PAUL II'S HUMANISM

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UDK 165.74 Joannes Paulus II

In the person and work of John Paul II, we recognize an eminent witness to truth — a witness to hope. The hope that John Paul II has brought both to the Church and to the world for the last twenty five years derives its power from the truth about man. Each year of the present pontificate has contributed to a coherent implementation of the programme outlined already in the Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis*, where we read that man is “the primary and fundamental way for the Church” (No. 14). Thus humanism has become a characteristic feature of the present pontificate. The source of John Paul II's humanism lies in the contemplation of the face of Christ that enables recognition of the truth about man. John Paul II is a witness to hope, since he has succeeded in showing Christianity as a personalistic religion in an epoch characterized by the abandonment of the idea of humanism, by putting into question a mere possibility of discovering of a universal truth about man, and by a manifold degradation of humanity caused in particular by totalitarian and nihilistic systems. Indeed, John Paul II has succeeded in showing Christianity as a personalistic religion that liberates man from his fears, and proclaims brotherhood of all men, rooted in the truth about the One and Trinitarian God. John Paul II's humanism draws on the power of the Gospel in history — on the power of the Gospel that expresses a “deep amazement at man's worth and dignity.”¹ In his dialogue with modern culture, John Paul II's demonstrates the contemporary significance of Christianity, which is seen as the key to understanding human problems and to building a culture worthy of man.

Let us bear in mind the fact that the epoch of secularization started by the Enlightenment project of a humanistic civilization that was propagated as an alternative to Christianity resulted in the loss of human identity, and deeply shook the identity of the Church. If, as Hölderlin says, it is the case that “poetically dwells man upon this earth,” a specific seismograph that records cultural shocks can be sought in poetry, which renders man's spiritual condition. Thus poet Thomas Stearns Eliot undoubtedly recorded the most dangerous tremors in the epoch of secularization.

1 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis*, No. 10.

"Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness on the face of the deep.
Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed the Church?
When the Church is no longer regarded, not even opposed, and men have
forgotten

All gods except Usury, Lust and Power."²

The moment the ways of the humanity and the ways of the Church parted, a mutual betrayal took place. "Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed the Church?" The poet does not resolve the question, but makes a diagnosis of the state of crisis. The image of the abyss, of "darkness on the face of the deep,"³ renders the disastrous condition of the human spirit after the "death of God" and the "death of man." Although the "death of God" is an absurdity in the metaphysical sense, it is nevertheless possible within the dimension of human consciousness and culture, and it is manifested by the loss of human identity. The "darkness on the face of the deep" evoked by the poet expresses the loss of human capability of self-knowledge and of self-discovery. Usury, lust and power do not demand any theoretical justification, as they have their immanent logic that is alien to the truth about man's special position in the world. The death of metaphysics inevitably involves the death of ethics. Once man stops recognizing himself as a unique being, he can no longer control his life, he turns himself into an object influenced by various powers, not only by the natural ones, but also by those that are results of his own actions.

One can say that Eliot's vision of the "deep," of the abyss, follows poet Karol Wojtyła in the poems written by him during the Second Vatican Council. Yet Wojtyła's vision is not a catastrophic one, as it draws on the wisdom of the Cross. The deep, the abyss inherent in the experience of our humanity, is the space of freedom that has become a dramatic way to salvation, since an act of faith in Jesus Christ involves an encounter of what is absolute in man with what is human in God. The deep, the abyss, is in no way bridged, yet it gets transformed. The humanism of Wojtyła's poetry is a Christocentric one, and the poems that he wrote during the Council can be read as a prophetic forecast of the deep humanism that was to characterize the pontificate of John Paul II. In the poem entitled "Abyss," an image of Peter's boat appears, sailing across the fields of human inner being in order to transform them in Christ.

"Nothing to bypass in this commotion.

Take a ray from the eye and write

2 T. S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" in: by the same author, *Poezje* [Poems], Kraków 1978, p. 170.

3 *Ibidem*, p. 168.

your sign.

Though you see no abyss in the mind
don't imagine that it is not there.

Light may not reach your sight, but the boat
shifts on to your shoulders:
the abyss is clothed in flesh,
become Fact
in all men."⁴

A reading of Karol Wojtyła's poetic texts, in which we find reflections of the thoughts of a participant in the Second Vatican Council, reveals how absolutely crucial to the service of Peter the human question is. Indeed, since the first days of John Paul II's pontificate, the problem of man has been the central motif in his teaching. On the day of the inauguration of the pontificate, all of us — people of little faith — could hear Peter's call, "Do not be afraid." The newly elected Pope based his hope on the knowledge of man brought about by the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Thus John Paul II addressed the world in the spirit of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*: "Open wide the doors for Christ. To his saving power open the boundaries of States, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization and development. Do not be afraid. Christ knows "what is in man." He alone knows it. So often today man does not know what is within him, in the depths of his mind and heart. So often he is uncertain about the meaning of his life on this earth. He is assailed by doubt, a doubt which turns into despair. We ask you therefore, we beg you with humility and trust, let Christ speak to man. He alone has words of life, yes, of eternal life."⁵ Already these words conveyed the programme of a new Evangelization that included the spiritual "rejuvenation" of the Church inspired already by the Council, which had outlined her mission more clearly than ever before. Precisely this inspiration was to be expressed synthetically by John Paul II in the formulation that man is "the primary and fundamental way for the Church." The thoughts which John Paul II expressed in his inaugural homily were also a response to the expectations of the world in an age of cultural chaos to be revealed the truth about man in such a way as not to ignore or diminish the problem of the "trouble with the existence," as Henryk Elzenberg aptly described human existential condition, which poses a special problem also from the pastoral point of view.

4 K. Wojtyła "Abyss," in: by the same author, *Poezje. Poems*, transl. by J. Peterkiewicz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1998, p. 154.

5 Pope John Paul II's Homily at the Mass Beginning His Pastoral Ministry, Vatican, 2 Nov. 1978 (<http://www.petersnet.net/browse1138htm>).

The pontificate of John Paul II must be perceived as a continuation and development of the essential message of the Second Vatican Council. We should by no means overlook the fact that the author of the *Acting Person* gave his philosophical work on the human person a very significant motto taken from a Conciliar document. "The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person."⁶ From the perspective of the twenty five years of the present pontificate, it seems even clearer that John Paul II's message can be comprehended fully only when personalistic categories are applied in its analysis. Two of these categories seem to be of prime significance, namely, the view of man as an image of God (*imago Dei*) and the status of the human person as a being capable of recognizing truth (*homo capax veri*), which enables the person to control his life and to encounter God in the communion of persons (*ipsi sibi providens, homo capax Dei*). In the course of my considerations, I will attempt to focus on these two categories and on their functioning in the thought of John Paul II, as I consider them crucial to the proper understanding of the Pope's humanism, as well as to the understanding of the "logic" the Providence has made use of in order to give the right direction to contemporary history at the turn of the second and the third millennium of the "case of Jesus" (cf. Ac 10: 38).

Man as imago Dei

The novelty of John Paul II's anthropology coincides with the fact that he has reintroduced the traditional Christian concept of *homo imago Dei* in the modern consciousness, and has given it the shape of a developed philosophical and theological doctrine. Such a foundation of anthropology enables a fruitful dialogue with modernity, whose ideological climate is marked with a clash between reason and faith, manifested by rationalistic naturalism on the one hand and by fideistic superspiritualism on the other. Thus, owing to John Paul II's view of man, it has become possible to overcome an acute intellectual crisis whose practical consequences might lead to a true anthropological catastrophe. During his almost twenty-five-year-long apostolic teaching, particularly in the first phase of his pontificate, John Paul II hermeneutically developed the Council's reflection on the revelation of man to man himself through Jesus Christ.⁷ If we consider the insufficiency of purely human un-

6 *Gaudium et spes*, No. 76. Cf. K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne* [The *Acting Person and Other Anthropological Studies*], Lublin 1994, p. 51.

derstanding of man and his history in the face of human alienation caused by various types of civilization built on atheistic foundations, the primacy of the religious moment in John Paul II's anthropology turns out to be the key to the solution of the problem of man.

What is man? This question springs from the innermost experience of what is human in man. Modern man is indeed deeply moved by the parts of the Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis* that refer to the truth of the human heart. "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. This, as has already been said, is why Christ the Redeemer "fully reveals man to himself." If we may use the expression, this is the human dimension of the mystery of the Redemption. In this dimension man finds again the greatness, dignity and value that belong to his humanity."⁸

I believe that the most meaningful commentary on the above words, quoted from John Paul II's programmatic encyclical, can be found in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, which are the record of an individual "history of a soul" bearing a universal and timeless significance. They culminate in a confession of regret: "Belatedly I loved thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new, belatedly I loved thee. For see, thou wast within and I was without, and I sought thee out there. Unlovely, I rushed heedlessly among the lovely things thou hast made. Thou wast with me, but I was not with thee."⁹ The quoted passage obviously describes the experience of alienation. Although St. Augustine is not familiar with that concept, he deeply expresses the experience of being "not-himself" in the innermost depth of his human "self." By penetrating deeply the experience of an inner, in-personal and conscious human existence, which makes man so distinct from other beings in the natural world, Augustine discovers the extreme alienation of man manifested by the experience of a "restless heart" that even in this state of estrangement and downfall remains invariably orientated towards God as personal Love. Human belonging to God has an ontic character; should this relationship happen not to be concretized and thus to be unfulfilled, human consciousness will experience absurd or even frustration and discouragement. Not only do St. Augustine's *Confessions* constitute a story about the history of a sin and about the conversion of a human individual living at the time when antiquity was drawing to

7 Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, No. 22.

8 *Redemptor hominis*, No. 10.

9 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X, Chapter XXVII, No. 38, translated and edited by A. C. Outler (<http://ccel.org/a/augustine/confessions/confessions-bod.html>).

its close, but they also provide a diagnosis of the condition of a civilization that ignores the existential truth about man as a being made in the image of his Creator. Needless to add that in our epoch, in which materialism and atheism have assumed unprecedented proportions, Augustine's experience gains a particular timeliness. Our atheistic and materialistic civilization has unveiled its hidden antihuman face, and the antihumanism inherent in it excludes conceiving of man as an absolute value. Even before he finds the loving God, and before he learns the truth about the Redemption, Augustine recognizes that his human subjectivity is orientated towards God. As he says in Book IV of his *Confessions*, after his friend's death, he already knew that no contingent being, even a personal one equal to him in dignity, could substitute God. The choice of a contingent being in place of God results in the loss of the true human identity; therefore Augustine will say: "I became a riddle to myself,"¹⁰ which in the original has an even stronger formulation: "et factus sum mihi magna quaestio".

The significance of St. Augustine's *Confessions* consists above all in that they provide a phenomenological description of the fact of man's ontic religiousness, which can be explained neither metaphysically nor even theologically in a non-contradictory way, unless the image of God inherent in man is uncovered. It is already here that we encounter the themes of *Deus absconditus* and *homo absconditus* in their mature shape. The union of these themes in one problem, namely, in the problem of man, which John Paul II interprets as the problem of love, shows that both the philosophy of St. Augustine's *Confessions* and the philosophy expressed in the Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis* are "philosophies of Advent," to use the beautiful term applied by Fr. Tadeusz Styczeń¹¹. One can say that the truth of the Gospel sheds a new light on the human condition, and that it presents the fact of Man-God so that man can discover more fully what he really is — and what makes him person. By no means does the Revelation cancel metaphysics, but rather extends the limits of metaphysics to the supernatural dimension, to which metaphysics itself has no access. Although there is no direct transition between an experience of the "restlessness of the heart" and the Gospel, the latter is called the Good News precisely because it provides a supernatural light by the working of the Incarnate God in order that we could recognize what we really are and why "restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee."¹² The human and the

10 *Ibidem*, Book IV, Chapter 4, No. 9.

11 Cf. T. Styczeń, SDS "Dlaczego Bóg chlebem? Etyka a teologia moralna. Między doświadczeniem winy a Objawieniem Odkupiciela" [Why Should God Become Bread? Ethics and Moral Theology. Between the Experience of Guilt and the Revelation of the Redeemer], *Ethos* 11(1998) Nos. 1-2 (41-42), pp. 31-60.

12 St. Augustine, *op. cit.*, Book I, Chapter 1, No. 1.

divine dimension of the mystery of Redemption permeate each other and, in some respect, also explain each other. It is significant — also in view of the challenge for the new evangelization that the Church is facing at the beginning of the third millennium — to see how deeply the Gospel of Jesus responds to the problem of man. The task of genuine philosophy is to provide the answer to the question about the sense of being, and since being manifests itself in man in particularly evident a way, this task is tantamount to taking an effort to comprehend what is divine in man. That is why an anthropological reading of the philosophy of being undoubtedly constitutes a preparation for the Gospel.

The way of Augustine, the way in which he seeks God and finds Him, is largely a negative experience, as what is genuinely human cannot be adequately explained in the purely natural world. Yet there is also a positive way of approaching the divine in man that corresponds to the negative way of Augustine, namely, the way associated with the mystical experience. At this point, we must recall the role that a study of the works of St. John of the Cross played in the formation of Karol Wojtyła's thought. This study resulted in the doctoral dissertation devoted to the problem of faith in the works of St. John of the Cross, which Wojtyła presented at the Angelicum University in Rome in 1948.¹³ This fact deserves being brought to attention, because the influence of St. John's of the Cross "lesson of humanism" is clearly visible in John Paul II's mature humanistic thought. It is worth referring here to a synthetic article by Karol Wojtyła entitled "O humanizmie św. Jana od Krzyża" [On the Humanism of St. John of the Cross],¹⁴ in which the author stresses the experiential nature of the subjective supernatural sphere in man. While presenting the essence of the humanism of the Spanish mystic, Wojtyła reaches the following conclusion: "The supernatural in man manifests itself as a suprasubjective fact which is at the same time a suprapyschological one. St. John of the Cross does not convince us about it by means of a discourse that would begin with an abstract presentation of man and his nature, but he rather does so by bringing to light a fact pulsating with manifestations of supernatural life in its experiential course, which comes to full realization in experience."¹⁵

13 See: K. Wojtyła, *Doctrina de fide apud S. Joannem a Cruce*, Roma 1948. See also: by the same author, *Faith According to St. John of the Cross*, transl. by J. Aumann, San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1981; by the same author, "The Question of Faith in St. John of the Cross," *Carmelite Studies*, 2 (1982) pp. 223–273; by the same author, *Świętego Jana od Krzyża nauka o wierze* [St. John's of the Cross Teaching on the Faith], transl. by K. Stawecka, Lublin 2000.

14 K. Wojtyła, *O humanizmie Św. Jana od Krzyża*, in: by the same author, *Aby Chrystus się nami postugiwał* [So That Christ Would Have Us at His Service], Kraków 1979, pp. 387–401.

15 K. Wojtyła, *O humanizmie...*, p. 397 (transl. of the excerpt — D. Ch.).

The significance of the works of St. John of the Cross consists in the fact that they uncover the mystery of man which is rooted in a still greater mystery of God, and that they do so in a phenomenological way, on the grounds of experience. The experience of faith and the accompanying experience of "night," with its emotional emptiness, uncovers the human person as a being that cannot be subject to objectivization and as a being that can gain fulfillment only on the way of transformation through interpersonal love in the communion with the Personal God. The key to the understanding of St. John's of the Cross humanism is in the conception of man as an image of God, which meets the condition of a realistic approach to man, experiences himself as a being stretched between the finite and the infinite.¹⁶

The connecting line between the anthropology of St. John of the Cross and the one of Pope John Paul II indeed requires a thorough and deep study that would transcend the scope of our considerations. However, let us merely mention that the line in question is alternative to the project of modernity, also known as modern immanentism, in which the vision of the human world is built on the assumption of the world's ontic self-sufficiency, and on the negation of human sinfulness, which in turn results in granting man soteriological prerogatives. "The rationalism of the Enlightenment put to one side the true God — in particular, God the Redeemer. The consequence was that man was supposed to live by his reason alone, as if God did not exist,"¹⁷ — said John Paul II in the interview given to Victorio Messori. Modern atheism, as proved by H. de Lubac, C. Fabro, E. Gilson, and in particularly articulate a way by A. Del Noce, is not a theoretical one, resulting from some specific cognitive data, but it is a practical atheism, which manifests itself in an option for a world without God. Indeed, this kind of atheism has made God "the great Absence" from the human world.¹⁸ Forgetting, or — as the Holy Father says in the quoted extract — "putting to one side" the truth about the image of God inherent in man, has also resulted in failure to respond to the dignity of man as person, as a being that is irreducible to the world of objects. The religious man has been replaced by the *homo faber*, by the revolutionist, the aesthete and nihilist, and finally, by the consumer. All these types of human existence

16 See: R. Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. Cf. also the Polish edition: R. Buttiglione, *Mysł Karola Wojtyły*, transl. by J. Merecki, SDS, Lublin 1996, s. 84–86.

17 His Holiness John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, New York 1994 (<http://www.catholic.net/RCC/POPE/HopeBook/toc.html>).

18 See: H. de Lubac, *Le drame de l'humanisme athée*, Paris 1983 (the English edition: H. de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, ET London 1949); C. Fabro, *Introduzione all'ateismo moderno*, Roma 1969; E. Gilson, *L'athéisme difficile*, Paris 1979; A. Del Noce, *Il problema dell'ateismo*, Bologna 1990.

show a common element, namely, the change of the "vertical," religious, perspective of human fulfillment to the "horizontal one," limited to worldliness, most frequently to the present moment. With the loss of the religious sense, history has become the only level of human fulfillment. However, man's absolute turn to the world has not remained without consequences for the world or for the human subject himself: both the world and man have become subjected to the absolute rule of man: either to the individual or to the collective one. Human freedom, conceived as autonomous and thus creative in the divine sense, has led to the negation of both the objective structure of the world and the axiological structure of the human subject. Instead of transcendence, which man naturally pursues following the truth of his heart, naturally directed towards Personal Infinity, the human subject now experiences merely an "illusion of infinity" inherent in his own projects. Let us stress here that postmodernism aptly discloses the illusion of so-called "great narrations" that lies in the pursuit of the absolute within the limits of the finite. Yet, on the other hand, postmodernism disregards the religious sense as much as modernity has done, by not considering it as genuine anthropological data. Thus man turns out to be no longer able to recognize the hierarchy of beings in the real world, while human freedom, which determines man's presence in history, shows no transcendent significance.

By bringing to prominence the religious moment in man, John Paul II points to the fact that the human person is the protagonist of history directed towards a transcendent meaningfulness. "In a religious man — writes Rocco Buttiglione — transcending the finite is never an act of its negation, annihilation or destruction; neither is it an attempt to violate the rights of the finite. Indeed, an act of transcending the finite leads man towards the higher, towards God, and simultaneously towards the mysterious depth of the human inner being."¹⁹ One must even say that once man is recognized as a religious being, and once the light of the Gospel is shed on his religiousness, he is restored to the world and to himself. Thus it is then that he abandons the kind of ontic "loneliness" to which he has been condemned by modern rationalism that denies that the faith — the bearer of the truth about Redemption through Love — has any significance for the understanding of the human fate or human activity in the world. It has been indeed an epochal deed on the part of John Paul II to undertake the work on a new synthesis of human freedom and religiousness. This synthesis involves reference to the idea of *theosis*, which is present in the theological reflection of the East and which was particularly

19 R. Buttiglione, *Problem wyzwolenia. Punkt widzenia katolika* [The Problem of Liberation. The Point of View of a Catholic], transl. by Fr. T. Styczeń, in: Fr. T. Styczeń, Fr. M. Radwan (eds.), *Problem wyzwolenia człowieka* [The Problem of the Liberation of Man], Rzym 1987, p. 256 (translation of the excerpt — D. Ch.).

well developed in the works of Maxim the Confessor.²⁰ Yet John Paul II shows a creative approach to this conception in the new historical context which is a product of the attempt to build a human civilization on the atheistic foundations resulting from the fact that the natural directedness of the human consciousness towards God has been questioned.

The futile attempts at salvation within the worldly and secular order, among which Marxism and consumer society — a non-dialectic and non-revolutionary version of materialism — manifest the most radical negation of the truth about man, inevitably provoke the question of whether it is not the case that the religious sense of human freedom should be identified with the human subject's pursuit of an encounter with Absolute Love in the communion of persons. This in turn provokes another question, namely: Alienation or divinisation in Christ (*theosis*)?

The answer that John Paul II gives to this question is absolutely positive. The subject of alienation, which he had taken up already in the Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis*, was more fully developed in *Centesimus annus* in relation to the social question that appeared after year 1989, at the historical moment of the collapse of Marxism. Even before starting his pontificate as John Paul II, Karol Wojtyła observed in his anthropological writings that alienation is negation of participation, and that it consists in the estrangement of a human person from the community.²¹ Thus the phenomenon of alienation is rooted in an individual's breaking the bond with other people and with God conceived as the ultimate goal of man. In the Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, alienation is described as "a reversal of means and ends" (No. 41) in the effect of which man no longer wants to transcend himself and thus becomes unable to fulfill himself through an unselfish gift of self. As a result, anything that surrounds man, including other human subjects, has only the nature of a means. "*Obedience to the truth* about God and man — writes the author of the Encyclical — is the first condition of freedom, making it possible for a person to order his needs and desires and to choose the means of satisfying them according to a correct scale of values, so that the ownership of

20 See: M. A. Krapiec, "Cywilizacja miłości" spełnieniem osoby ["Civilization of Love" Is the Fulfillment of Man], in: T. Styczeń, SDS (ed.), *Człowiek w poszukiwaniu zagubionej tożsamości* [Man in a Search for the Lost Identity], Lublin 1987, pp. 233–236. John Paul II's position is described as a synthesis of Western and Eastern personalism, since he has continued and developed the conception of man as *imago Dei*. In the light of this approach, man's natural turn to God encounters God's action in man, which leads to the divinisation of man.

21 Cf. K. Wojtyła "Participation or Alienation," *Analecta Husserliana* 6(1977) pp. 61–73. Cf. also: by the same author, "Uczestnictwo czy alienacja," [Participation or Alienation] in: by the same author, *Osoba i czyn oraz inne studia antropologiczne*, Lublin 1994, pp. 447–461.

things may become an occasion of growth for him."²² The fact of human alienation, unmasking man's "self-mutilation," and causing his frustration with the impossibility of fulfillment outside love, inevitably provokes the question about the relationship between freedom and truth. This question, as well as the one concerning the interpretation of the problem of man as the problem of love, constitutes a fundamental pillar of John Paul II's humanism. For this reason, it is on this issue that we shall concentrate our attention now.

Let us add at this point that uncovering the image of God in man, which John Paul II does so evocatively, has grave implications for the personalistic understanding of the so-called "earthly realities," in particular the ones of family and work. While referring to the revelation of humanity in Jesus Christ, the Pope speaks about the "Gospel of family"²³ and the "Gospel of work."²⁴ The communitarian sense of both human work and fulfillment in marital and family love does not pertain merely to the worldly reality: owing to the Incarnation of the Son of God, it has gained its specific religious dimension that opens the finite nature of the human existence onto the Infinity of God. The autonomy of earthly realities and the axiology inherent in this autonomy do not contradict a religious vision of man, but find a deeper ontic rootedness in it. Therefore one can say that the focus of the multidimensional message given to the world during John Paul II's pontificate is the humanistic power of Christianity, demonstrated by the approach to man in the light of Jesus Christ.

Freedom, as Seen in the Splendour of Truth

Due to its principal significance for man's self-understanding, the theme of truth has become a central topic to John Paul II's teaching. Indeed, directed by his hunger for truth about himself, man seeks God. We have already said that deprived of the conditions that enable him to reach transcendence, and thus limited to his finite nature, man becomes incapable of comprehending the sense of his existence, and becomes subject to alienation. Truth turns out to be the most fundamental condition for transcendence, which in turn means that without knowing truth man would be unable to fulfill himself in love. We have observed that the Pope identifies the essence of alienation with a

22 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, No. 41. See also a commentary on the problem of alienation, as seen in the thought of Karol Wojtyła — John Paul II, in: A. Szostek, MłC, *Alienacja: problem wciąż aktualny* [Alienation — Still Topical a Problem], in: Fr. F. Kampka, C. Ritter (eds.), *Jan Paweł II, "Centesimus annus". Tekst i komentarze* [John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*. Text and Commentaries], Lublin 1998, pp. 293–308.

23 Cf. John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, No. 2.

24 Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem exercens*, No. 6.

disturbance of the relation obtaining between means and ends. Due to this disturbance, the human reason can no longer fulfill the task of opening itself onto the reality and of informing the subject about the reality, but it becomes a tool to exert control over this reality, whatever its inner structure. By pointing to God's image in man, John Paul II simultaneously points to the foundations of the inborn human dignity, which lie in the person's ability to recognize truth. "The *primary* dignity of the intelligent subject [...] lies in the contemplation of truth."²⁵ It might seem that the contemplation of truth has a merely theoretical sense, but according to John Paul II, it shows itself as bearing a specific deep existential-practical significance, since truth has a normative power and demands obedience as the only apt answer to its recognition. This was accentuated already in Wojtyła's work *The Acting Person*.²⁶

Another main source of humanism in the present pontificate is, apart from the encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, the Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor*. However, its significance must not be restricted to that of the Magisterium's teaching on the crisis in modern moral theology. Although this problem is undoubtedly situated within the concern of the author of the encyclical, the significance of the document is much greater, as its power lies in the fact that it includes a direct lecture on the foundations of Christian morality. *Veritatis splendor* is devoted to the problem of conscience, it is indeed a treaty on the essence of morality, and one can say that it occupies a prominent position in the entire history of ethics. It refers to the rich output of the Christian moral tradition, revealing its rationality and universality. However, not only does *Veritatis splendor* bring to mind the "eternal truths" of the tradition, but it deepens their understanding by its reference to a new historical context. The encyclical about truth is simultaneously an encyclical about freedom. *Veritatis splendor* brings to light the objective side of moral duty by pointing to natural law; however, it does not obscure the subject of moral duty, namely, a particular person who discovers his or her subjectivity and autonomy in an act of cognitive contact with the reality.

The Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor* is above all a testimony to an extremely fruitful dialogue with modernity thanks to which it has become possible to overcome the crisis in our concept of the categories that are most fundamental to the proper understanding of human culture, namely, the categories of good and evil. Discovering the principles of good and evil constitutes

25 A. Rosmini, *Principles of Ethics*, Chapter 3, Article 66, Durham, England: Rosmini House, 1988 (http://www.rosmini-in-english.org/Webpe/PE_Ch03A1_9.htm). See also: by the same autor, *Principi della scienza morale* [The Principles of Moral Science], Roma 1990, p. 98.

26 Cf. Card. K. Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, Dordrecht-Boston-London 1979, p. 161f. See also: by the same author, *Osoba i czyn...*, pp. 204-206.

the way to respond to the crisis that consists in the loss of the human identity. Thus the philosophical theme of truth, seen as the normative principle of morality, has provided the tool to deal with the crisis in the theoretical field of moral theology itself, as well as in numerous spheres of modern culture. Despite the fact that the notion of truth does not enjoy a vast popularity nowadays, it is precisely this notion that John Paul II perceives as the key to the solution of contemporary problems.

The Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor* constitutes part of the debate on human autonomy that has been conducted since the beginning of modernity. The main line in modern thought, which has determined the process of the shaping of the history of Europe and both Americas (and due to the fact of colonization, also the history of other continents in part) has sought the principle governing man's autonomy in his freedom, seen as the tool thanks to which he can realize his either individual or collective project. Modern humanism has been based precisely on this radical vision of human autonomy. In fact, it has been a consequence of the rationalistic line of thought already mentioned here in relation to its failure to recognize the truth about man's supernatural vocation. Rationalism has not only detached man from the Divine source of his being, but it has also confined human thinking to the limits of reason. Thus reason has ceased to be the faculty of perceiving the reality; instead it has become the faculty of exercising control over the world. As a result, the contemplative reason has been replaced by the instrumental one. However, the blame for all the failures of modern humanism must not be put entirely on Descartes or Kant, although their epistemological fallacy — due to the power of its consequences — has become an anthropological one. Breaking the moral bond between human cognition and action has contributed to the creation of the concept of man as himself subject to human activity. Thus the human person has become an artifact, a product of his own conception. Let us observe that the mingling of rationalistic, atheistic, materialistic and revolutionary threads in Marxism determined its undoubtedly attractive character, and showed it as a philosophy that included a declaration of the promotion of the case of man. The project of the social revolution, which was to consist in a total reconstruction of the society, broke down in 1989, together with the collapse of the communist system. However, already since the 1960's, there has been a constant attempt to replace the project of a social revolution with the project of a "moral" one, aimed above all at changing the personalistic nature of marriage and family, so far conceived as natural communities of persons who fulfill themselves in a gift of love. This "moral" revolution is accompanied by a technological one, which ensures high consumption standards and a growing production efficiency. Yet, considering modern genetic experiments, the "moral" revolution in question may soon be accompanied also by a "genetic" one. The dream about the power of human freedom ends

rather banally, by being suddenly woken up in a department store, where anything is for sale, not excluding human persons. Thus one can observe an awakening of the postmodernist consciousness, expressed by the dissatisfaction about reducing the human being to the world of objects, by stressing that the human person is a unique being, and by nostalgia for another world. Yet relativism based on cognitive skepticism excludes the possibility of taking this nostalgia seriously, and it is incapable of solving the problem of the transcendence of the human "self."

The Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor* opens the way for human persons to abandon "living as slaves" (cf. Ex 20: 2), imposed on them by the rationalistic culture that has confined man to his reason and to his artifacts.²⁷ John Paul II restores a more harmonious understanding of the human subject, regarding both the relationship to the external, non-subjective world and the person's relationship to himself. Freedom consists in self-determination of the subject in truth. Thus freedom is inherently present in the very essence of a cognitive act, which grants the subject his autonomy as well as the possibility of being directed by the light of truth in which he perceives the reality himself. The ability to recognize truth lies at the foundations of building a human culture and of exerting control over the history of mankind. Modernity wished man to take his fate in his hands; indeed, to use I. Kant's words, it even proclaimed the humanity's "coming of age," which was identified with the epoch of Enlightenment. However, the subjectivism of human reason confined to its immanence does not allow a genuine promotion of man. The resulting necessity of recourse to violence, as well as relativism in building a culture, which are considered to be the alleged price of autonomy, are contrasted in *Veritatis splendor* with John Paul II's vision of human autonomy as providence both for the subject himself and for others. By referring to the Thomistic formulation: *sibi ipsi et aliis providens*, John Paul II confronts the hopes of modernism to build a new and in many respects better world. Yet he has significantly refined the modern conception of autonomy by bringing it to its fullness, lacking in the immanentistic thought, as he has succeeded in combining the conception of autonomy and the conception of natural law in his coherent teaching.

While speaking about the great charts of John Paul II's humanism, we focus our attention on *Veritatis splendor* as — to refer to G. Weigel's opinion — together with *Centesimus annus* and *Evangelium vitae* (the Encyclical Let-

27 This aspect of the liberation of the human subject from the confinement to the immanence of reason was brought to attention by W. Chudy in his commentary on the encyclical. Cf. W. Chudy, *Światło dla wszystkich*, [Light for All] in: A. Szostek, MIC (ed.), *Jan Paweł II "Veritatis splendor." Tekst i komentarze* [John Paul II. Text and Commentaries], Lublin 1995, pp. 264–267.

ters that respectively preceded and followed it), it constitutes a triptych that expresses the present stage in the social teaching of the Church.²⁸ This stage is described by Weigel as defence of man, and John Paul II, the author of the three mentioned encyclicals, is given by him the noble title of *defensor hominis*.

Indeed, John Paul II's social triptych includes a transpolitical interpretation of modern history. Let us recall that year 1989 is perceived by the Slavonic Pope as crucial for the social question, the significance of which was noticed already over a hundred years ago by Pope Leo XIII, who also stressed that it demanded a solution worthy of man. Yet the hundredth anniversary of Leo XIII's Encyclical Letter *Rerum novarum* (of 1891) took place in a more complex context of modernity. That anniversary coincided with the collapse of communism as a system of political dictatorship and as an inefficient system of economic production that prevented development in vast areas of the world, as well as a system of culture based on ideological coercion that did not exclude administrative State conducted atheisation. Simultaneously, the division of the world imposed in Yalta, which resulted not only in depriving numerous nations of human rights, but also in depriving them of the rights that inherently belong to nations as such, was drawing to its close. Today, the image of the emerging new world should be seen against an even broader historical background, namely, one delineated by the 200th anniversary of the Great French Revolution (of 1789), the first experiment in history aimed at a total reconstruction of the society with a recourse to the principle of violence, which was considered as the way to build a community that would fully enjoy human and civil rights. Year 1989 indeed signifies the cancellation of numerous existing divisions and controversies: between the East and the West, between communism and capitalism, between progressivism and conservatism, between the lay attitude and the religious one. No wonder there even appeared opinions about the approaching end of history, occasionally accepted with enthusiasm, although in fact they were rather naïve.

A recognition of the primacy of culture over politics and economics results in focusing attention on the principles against which social and economic life should be built. It remains a paradox of the modern world that it has managed to produce the democratic system as well as market economy, both of which imply the principle of freedom governed by the truth about man, while simultaneously the absolutely basic truths about truth, including the truth about

28 See: G. Weigel, "The moral foundations of freedom: lessons from the religious encounter with democracy" (<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/2000/Nov00/Weigel.htm>). Cf. also: by the same author, "Centésimus annus a przyszłość demokracji: powtórna lektura" [*Centésimus annus and the Future of Democracy: a Repeated Reading*], transl. by M. Ritter, J. Merecki, SDS, in: *Jan Paweł II. "Centésimus annus." Tekst i komentarze*, pp. 116f.

man, have been questioned within this very same culture, which has inevitably led to axiological nihilism. It is in the breach between the modern democratic system and its axiological foundations that John Paul II perceives a danger of its turning into "open or thinly disguised totalitarianism."²⁹ The special consideration that the events of year 1989 have been given in the Pope's teaching is undoubtedly a result of the general, truly universal significance of the Central European "autumn of nations," as these events were termed then. What deserves particular attention about them is the moral character of the changes accompanying the collapse of communism. From the very beginning of the *Solidarity* movement, John Paul II noticed and supported the "human" dimension of liberation as having a more fundamental nature than that of merely political changes. It is worth recalling here his words, so full of hope, with which he addressed the Poles in 1983, during the pilgrimage to his Homeland at the time of martial law: "You come to the Mother of Cz stochowa with a wound in the heart, with sorrow, perhaps also with rage. Your presence shows the force of a testimony, a witnessing which has stupefied the whole world: when the Polish worker made his own person the object of a demand, with the Gospel in his hand and a prayer on his lips. The images transmitted to the world in 1980 have touched hearts and consciences. It was only possible, as the underlying question was not an otherwise important one, "how much?," but, "in the name of what?" It was the question about the sense of human work, about its deepest essence. While giving the answer to so formulated a question, we must not overlook the fundamental principles that are as deep as man, and that take their origin in God."³⁰ There is an evident continuity between John Paul II's antitotalitarian teaching before and after 1989. Both then and now the same matter is at stake, namely, the primacy of culture — whose core is religion and morality — over politics and economy.

One can hardly find fault with this vision. It is hardly possible to perceive it either as utopian or as promoting fundamentalism. If such concerns are occasionally expressed, they probably result from a fundamental misunderstanding of the essence of the relationship obtaining between truth and freedom. Those who express opinions of this kind have not taken full cognizance of the fact that while stressing the absolute primacy of culture, John Paul II remains a personalist. He holds that truth is always recognized by a particular human subject and binding in conscience to this particular subject. If truth

29 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, No. 46.

30 John Paul II, *Moc  wiadectwa* [The Power of Testimony], Address to pilgrims from Szczecin and Kamie  Diocese, Cz stochowa, 18 June 1983, in: by the same author, *Pok j tobie, Polsko! Ojczyzno moja!* [Peace Be with You, Poland! My Homeland!], Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome 1983, p. 73 (transl. of the excerpt — D. Ch.). Cf. also: C. Bernstein, M. Politi, *John Paul II and the Hidden History of Our Time*, Doubleday, New York 1996, p. 380.

is genuinely the most personal and the most private of human goods, one cannot conceive an act of violence as done in the name of truth. On the contrary, it is rather the culture that tends to be built upon skeptical and relativistic presumptions that should be perceived as posing a totalitarian threat to democracy.

John Paul II's social teaching culminates in his conception of human rights perceived as the affirmation of genuine human dignity. In this field, the thought of John Paul II confronts the noblest intuitions of modernity and the problem of the protection of human rights clearly marks the "main path" of the present pontificate. "Care and responsibility for man" (CA, No. 53) do not let the Pope — defender of man — fail to notice the dangerous cracks in the modern concept of human rights. He does not hesitate to describe the dark sides of modern culture, in which respect for life is becoming obsolescent, as "a culture of death," as "a conspiracy against life" (EV, No. 12), or even directly as "a barbarian civilization."³¹ One cannot conceive either of genuine respect for human rights or of building a truly human civilization without falling into contradiction, unless one recognizes the right to life as the fundamental human right. Defence of the lives of the unborn has truly become part of the contemporary social question, and it is the field on which the striving for a humanistic face of our civilization is taking place. Thus, it is not simply one among many other painful problems with which we have to deal in our time. On the contrary, by taking up defence of the right to life, we take a standpoint in relation to the problem that will have a decisive significance for further history of the civilization founded on human rights. "These attacks go directly against respect for life and they represent a *direct threat to the entire culture of human rights*. It is a threat capable, in the end, of jeopardizing the very meaning of democratic coexistence: *rather than societies of "people living together," our cities risk becoming societies of people who are rejected, marginalized, uprooted and oppressed.*"³²

While reading these words of John Paul II's in the context of modern history, we see him as the Shepard leading his Church and humanity along a foot bridge over an abyss, over the "deep" — to evoke here once again the dramatic metaphor from T. S. Eliot's and K. Wojtyła's poetry. The abyss, the "deep," reaches the depth of the human conscience, and thus it reaches the depth of our humanity, in which freedom becomes self-dependence in truth.

31 Pastoral visit to Poland. Homily of the Holy Father at the Shrine of Saint Joseph, Kalisz, 4 June, 1997 (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/travels/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_04061997_en.html). Cf. also: John Paul II, *Rodzina wspólnotą życia i śmierci* [The Family is a Community of Life and Death], Homilia w sanktuarium św. Józefa w Kaliszu, 4 czerwca 1997] "L'Osservatore Romano", Polish Edition, 18(1997) No. 7, p. 35.

32 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae*, No. 18.

Today, we can walk over the abyss more safely, as during the twenty five years of his pontificate John Paul II has been unremittingly showing us the splendour of the first principles of human "being together." Therefore, we must express our immense gratitude to the Providence for the fact that the voice of the truth about man, so full of love, now reaches "the whole world" (Ps 19a), the abyss, the "deep" of the human mind and heart, accompanied by the prayer and suffering of the Pope, the incredible witness to God's Charity, full of care and responsibility for man.