

CHAPTER SIX

Theological Anthropology in the Encyclicals of John Paul II

JOHN O'DONNELL

From 1978 to 1995, Pope John Paul wrote twelve encyclicals.¹ Even a glance at their titles reveals a striking diversity: some are specifically theological, others are concerned with morality, a few are devoted to ecumenism, two deal specifically with social questions. Nonetheless, through all of them runs the theme of the human person. In his first and programmatic encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, the pontiff had written, “This man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: *he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church*, the way traced out by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the Mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption” (RH 14.1). Thirteen years later, as if to remind us that he had not forgotten this leitmotif of his pontificate, in *Centesimus Annus*, the Pope devotes once again an entire section to the theme “Man is the way of the Church.”²

As we would expect from the leader of the Catholic Church, the Pope bases his anthropology on Jesus Christ. As he puts it in *Veritatis Splendor*, “Jesus Christ is the answer to man’s questions” (VS 2.2). Thus J. Michael Miller is right on target when he says that Christocentrism shines through every encyclical. To sum it up in a phrase, we could say with Miller, “It is the redemptive Incarnation of the Man-God, who fully reveals the dignity of the person: *ecce homo!*”³

Pope John Paul II has often reiterated that he considers it his mission to implement Vatican II. This is no doubt true. What struck me, however, in reading carefully through the Pope's twelve encyclicals is that his understanding of the Council is inspired by a few key texts. At least these are the ones that recur repeatedly in his writings. I was particularly struck by the recurrence of a few passages from *Gaudium et Spes*. Three are particularly noteworthy. The first is no. 22, where the Council affirms that Christ, the new Adam, fully reveals man to himself. The second is no. 24, where the Council affirms that of all creatures, man is the only one that God willed for himself. In this number, the Council goes on to affirm that Christ reveals the authentic vocation of the human person which is fulfilled "through a sincere gift of self." The third is no. 76, where the Council states that it is the mission of the Church to safeguard the transcendence of the human person. The Pope will repeatedly come back to this point, signaling transcendence as the key to human dignity. The loss of this perspective led to the atheistic regimes of the totalitarian states of Eastern Europe as well as to the moral permissiveness and ethical relativism of so many countries of the West.

In reading through all the encyclicals in their totality, one is also struck by another fact: the Pope has a number of favorite scripture texts. The ones that leapt off the page for me were Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 1:28. The index of the collected encyclicals reveals that Genesis 1:26-27 is cited nine times in the Pope's letters while Genesis 1:28 is referred to eleven times. This fact is particularly significant, for it indicates one of the principal ways in which the Pope thinks of the human person. In the first instance, he underscores the fact that by the creation the human being, man and woman, is made in the image of God. But Pope John Paul II also continually links together the doctrine of creation and redemption. If by creation the person is made in the image of God, through the Incarnation he or she is led to a deeper realization of that image. The person through Christ shares not only biological life but eternal life. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, human persons are introduced to friendship with God. In this friendship, God's plan for the creation finds its fulfillment.

The Pope cites Irenaeus to the effect that “the glory of God is man, the living man.” But he also emphasizes that Irenaeus believed that “the life of man consists in the vision of God” (EV 38.2).

In all the Pope’s reflections, we note that the truth about creation has to be understood in the light of the redemption in Christ. Ultimately this means that the human being as *imago Dei* must be interpreted as *imago trinitatis*. In his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Pope reflects on this in a bold and creative way, arguing that the reciprocal love of man and woman in marriage with its generative aspect is the best reflection we have of the Trinity, where the nature of God consists in the love of the divine persons, specifically the love of the Father and the Son, which has an infinite fruitfulness in the procession of the Holy Spirit.⁴

Another aspect of the *imago* dear to the Pope is grounded in Genesis 1:28, in the Lord God’s command to our first parents to subdue the earth and have dominion over it. The text inspires much of the Pope’s thinking in *Laborem Exercens*, where John Paul offers us his theological vision of work. He breaks new ground in seeing work not only as drudgery but as an expression of human creativity, which is a share in God’s own proper vocation to be Creator. The Pope sees in this text God’s call to human beings to be stewards of the creation. Understanding the human relation to the creation as domination and exploitation instead of as stewardship has led to the present ecological crisis, and once again John Paul appeals to Genesis 1:28 in summoning men and women to a responsible use of the world’s natural resources (see CA 37).

The Pope’s vision of the human is, therefore, distinctively Christological. As the Council stated, in the Incarnation Christ has identified himself in some way with every man (GS 22). Only by discovering Christ and being conformed to him can men and women realize their dignity as *imago Dei*. Let us now look in more detail at how the Pope spells this out in his encyclicals.

The Spiritual Vision of the Human Person

Pope John Paul II follows the entire Christian tradition in proposing a spiritual vision of human beings. God has a plan for

the creature he has willed as his own (*Gaudium et Spes* 24). This plan becomes fully revealed in Christ, but the Pope insists that the plan is already inscribed in human beings by the very fact that they are creatures. In his first encyclical he wrote, "There is but a single goal, to which is directed the deepest aspiration of the human spirit as expressed in the quest for God, for the full dimension of its humanity, or in other words for the full meaning of human life" (*RH* 11.2). This phrase echoes Augustine's famous dictum: "Our hearts are restless and they shall not rest until they rest in Thee." In other words, human beings are made for God, and the searching of the human heart will not rest until it finds God. God is not an extrinsic goal of human life. Finding God and finding the meaning of human life are one and the same.

Contemporary theologians such as Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan have tried to spell out this same truth in reflecting upon the meaning of human subjectivity as transcendental. In all our acts of understanding and willing, in our knowledge and in our freedom, we are seeking to realize ourselves. Yet all these acts are partial, limited and incomplete. One act leads us to another, and in each one there is an inchoate presence of the goal of our striving, the Mystery of God.

Without using Rahner's technical language, Pope John Paul on various occasions in the encyclicals speaks of being and having as two dimensions of human being. These terms are analogous to what theologians such as Rahner and Lonergan call the transcendental and categorical aspects of human existence. As subjects we *are*. In the depths of our beings, we are longing for union with the absolute Thou, God as Holy Being. But since we are finite, our being is always situated in the world. The worldly dimension of being opens up the dimension of having. We can possess things, make projects, master the environment. Even our bodies are something we both are and have.

As God's creatures, we are meant to live in the world. It is wrong to deny the worldly and corporeal dimension of our being. But if having gains transcendency over being, we lose touch with ourselves and our deepest roots. Being can be submerged in having. Western societies, according to the Pope, are particularly prone to this temptation. When this happens, a spiritual void

opens up. One can seek to fill up this emptiness with things. The result is consumerism. John Paul writes, "To 'have' objects and goods does not in itself perfect the human subject, unless it contributes to the maturing and enriching of that subject's 'being,' that is to say unless it contributes to the realization of the human vocation as such" (SRS 28.4). In another place he notes, "It is not wrong to want to live better: what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed to 'having' rather than 'being,' and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself" (CA 36.4).

If consumerism is a false interpretation of the goal of life, what then in the Pope's mind constitutes the authentic human vocation? One word to describe it could be life. As Creator, God shares his life with us. By our creaturehood, we participate in God's being. It is this participation which makes men and women the image of God. In *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope writes, "God proclaims that he is absolute Lord of the life of man, who is formed in his image and likeness (see Gen 1:26-28). Human life is thus given a sacred and inviolable character, which reflects the inviolability of the Creator himself" (EV 53.3). Commenting on this text, James Keenan asks, "Why is life good? Why is it always a good? The answer is simple and clear: because it is a gift from the Creator, who breathed into man the divine breath, thus making the human person the image of God."⁵

But of course human biological life does not fulfill the full meaning of life according to the Scriptures. In the fourth gospel we read, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (Jn 10:10). Thus Jesus offers us supernatural life. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we enter into the very life of God. We are granted friendship with God. The fullness of life comes through the covenant of God with humankind. Thus the Pope writes, "The life which God bestows upon man is much more than mere existence in time. It is a drive toward fullness of life: *it is the seed of an existence which transcends the very limits of time*: For God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity (Wis 2:23)" (EV 34.5).

We have seen that an important text for the Pope's thinking is *Gaudium et Spes* 24, where the Council affirms that human

beings realize themselves through a sincere gift of self. Here in the context of the human vocation, we see that the most radical call of God to the human person is a call to surrender to the Lord's offer of the covenant. We are called not only to biological life within the sphere of a human temporal existence. We are called to the eternal life of friendship with God. This call is fulfilled when we surrender ourselves "in a sincere gift of ourselves" to the Lord's offer of friendship.

In one passage in *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope does not hesitate to describe the human vocation as a vocation to love. He then goes on to say that "love as a sincere gift of self" is what gives the life and the freedom of the person their deepest meaning (*EV* 96.1). In another passage, this point is clarified further when John Paul affirms that love is made possible "by the person's essential 'capacity for transcendence' " (*CA* 41.3). In other words, because of human openness to God, an openness which reveals itself as an unlimited restlessness, the person is made capable of love, love of God in the first place and then love of neighbor.

In a number of his writings, the Pope deplores the fact that so much of modern culture consists precisely in a denial of this transcendence (e.g., *CA* 13.3; 24.2; *EV* 22:1-4). Whether in the explicit atheistic regimes of Marxism or in the undeclared atheism of consumerist societies, the reality of God and hence of human transcendence is denied. There is a pervasive sense of the loss of God. In this type of culture, the human being easily ceases to be a subject. He is easily reduced to being a thing. The prevailing way of relating to reality becomes manipulation, doing, control. All too easily other persons are also seen as things. The result becomes, on the one hand, inner confusion, ennui, a sense of meaninglessness, and on the other, exploitation of others without restraint, class struggle, and the survival of the fittest.

The way out of this impasse can only be found by summoning human beings back to their true spiritual destiny. Pope John Paul considers it one of the tasks of his pontificate precisely to articulate this prophetic challenge. He sees it as his mission to issue a clarion call to rediscover the authentic sense of human freedom.

The Vocation to Freedom

The meaning of freedom

From his first encyclical, the Pope has been concerned about the meaning of human freedom. He is inspired by the words of St. John's gospel: "You will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (Jn 8:32). Commenting on this passage, John Paul writes, "These words contain both a fundamental requirement and a warning: the requirement of an honest relationship with regard to truth as a condition for an authentic freedom, and the warning to avoid every kind of illusory freedom, every superficial unilateral freedom, every freedom that fails to enter into the whole truth about man and the world" (*RH* 12.3). In a later encyclical, the Pope notes that "freedom which refused to be bound to the truth would fall into arbitrariness and end up submitting itself to the vilest of passions, to the point of self-destruction" (*CA* 4.5).

The Pope's fundamental perspective, therefore, is a reiteration of the classical Catholic position that the transcendentals are intrinsically linked together. The one, the true, the good, and the beautiful are essentially interconnected, and their ultimate source of unity is in God. Human beings realize the good through their moral life. But the good is essentially connected to the truth of things. One can only do the good by knowing the truth.

In the context of Christian faith, this entails knowing the plan of God in the creation and redemption. We have already seen what this means: namely, that all human beings have a vocation to love, that they can only realize themselves by a sincere gift of self. This gift of self consists most radically in the surrender to God in faith, what St. Paul calls the obedience of faith (Rom 16:26). This surrender to God expresses itself concretely in everyday life in the sincere gift of self to one's neighbor. St. Paul once again has meditated on this Christian understanding most profoundly in the fifth chapter of Galatians. Freedom does not mean serving the needs of the flesh — that is, egoism — but rather the surrender of self in love. As the Apostle writes, "Be servants of one another" (Gal 5:13).

From this it is clear that Pope John Paul rejects the understanding of autonomy prevalent in much of modern culture. Human freedom does not consist in creating one's own values, as existentialists such as Nietzsche and Sartre have proposed. The Pope warns that modern understandings of democracy often imply a false understanding of autonomy. In this sense, democracy would consist in the truth of the majority opinion. For example, if the majority consider abortion acceptable, this would make it morally right. This approach to autonomy divorces freedom from its link with the truth and, as the Pope points out, opens the path to totalitarianism.

In his moral and social encyclicals, the Pope especially laments the contemporary skepticism about moral values, the tendency toward hedonism and the prevailing relativism. These attitudes lead many men and women to believe that there is no longer any clear distinction between good and evil, that there are no moral absolutes. These attitudes must be challenged by recalling humankind to a vision of freedom rooted in truth.

The abuse of freedom

Christian realism accepts the fact that the history of human freedom has often been tragic. This sorrowful history has its roots in the "sin which happened at the beginning" (*DV* 35.1), humankind's failure to accept God's offer of love and friendship. The consequences of this misuse of freedom are revealed today with a power as perhaps never before. The misuse of freedom has brought us to the verge of the self-destruction of the human race.

As John Paul began his pontificate, he looked out at the world about him. He saw humankind as living in profound anxiety, not only about the meaning of life but also about the possibilities of the future. The twentieth century has been one of wars on a scale without precedent, of concentration camps, of totalitarian governments. Although the technological achievements of humankind are unparalleled, the fact remains that humanity is threatened by the very things which men and women have produced. The Pope writes, "Man therefore lives increasingly in fear. He is afraid that what he produces . . . can radically turn against himself: he is

afraid that it can become the means and instrument for an unimaginable self-destruction, compared with which all the cataclysms and catastrophes of history known to us seem to fade away” (RH 15.2). Among the other aspects of the modern drama which the Pope sees is the vast chasm between the rich nations and the poor ones, between the first world and the third world. The first world is alienated by consumerism, while the third world is literally starving. And the divisions between these two worlds are also fostered by the competing interests of the superpowers. In later encyclicals, especially in *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope will focus on the culture of death as the glaring revelation of the misuse of freedom. The culture of death is present not only in murder and warfare, but also in the devaluation of life in abortion and euthanasia, and even in capital punishment.

We have spoken of the misuse of freedom. This is another word for what Christian faith has traditionally called sin, or what the Pope calls “living in untruthfulness.”⁶ While the Pope is only reiterating the classical Christian understanding of sin in the light of the contemporary situation, he does introduce a new element when he speaks of structures of sin.

Today, as never before, we are aware that the misuse of freedom becomes embodied in social structures. Racism is a typical example. Even if an individual is totally committed to respecting all men and women as made in the image of God, the culture in which he lives can be systematically racist. By the very fact that he lives in this culture, he can be participating in discrimination against minority races. What I buy in the supermarket may be literally the fruit of exploitation. Another example would be trading policies between rich and poor countries. The Pope specifically mentions the structures of sin found in certain countries that advocate abortion. He writes, “One cannot overlook the network of complicity which reaches out to include international institutions, foundations and associations which systematically campaign for the legalization and spread of abortion in the world. . . . We are facing what can be called a ‘structure of sin’ which opposes human life not yet born” (EV 59.2). He also calls attention to two other attitudes which are opposed to God’s plan for humanity and which are often structurally embodied in

modern culture, namely, the all-consuming desire for profit and the thirst for power (SRS 37.1). While the Pope does not hesitate to point out these structures of sin, he also wishes to make clear that they are always “linked to the *concrete acts* of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove” (SRS 36.2). We cannot therefore hide behind these structures as a maneuver to escape from individual responsibility. Each person bears the responsibility for his or her freedom.

The Restoration of Freedom

In a famous meditation in the *Spiritual Exercises* (136ff.), St. Ignatius conceives of a vast battle between the army of Satan and that of Christ. Each leader addresses his forces and proposes to them the values by which they should live and invites them to fight under his standard. The idea of the clash between two superhuman forces occurs in the encyclicals of Pope John Paul. For example, in *Evangelium Vitae* he writes, “We are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the ‘culture of death’ and the ‘culture of life.’ We find ourselves not only ‘faced with’ but necessarily ‘in the midst of’ this conflict” (EV 28.1). While this conflict is expressed openly in society, both for St. Ignatius and the Pope the real *locus* of the battle is the heart of the human person. Thus, in *Centesimus Annus*, the Pope writes, “The struggle between good and evil continues even in the human heart” (CA 25.4). Earlier in *Dominum et Vivificantem*, the Pope had cited *Gaudium et Spes* 10 to the effect that “the imbalances under which the modern world labors are linked with that more basic *imbalance* rooted in the *heart of man*. For in man himself many elements wrestle with one another” (DV 44.2).

In the Christian vision, however, we never lose hope, because the Holy Spirit comes to our aid in this struggle. The first work of the Spirit is to warn us of the danger and to turn our hearts away from the false sense of autonomy. In a long section of *Dominum et Vivificantem*, the Pope meditates on a passage of John 16 where Jesus says that the Holy Spirit “will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (vv. 7-8). Sin

consists in the rejection of Jesus, of his way and of his values. The same John had affirmed earlier in the gospel that Jesus would set us free. But this can only happen when we first let ourselves be convicted concerning sin. But as the Pope points out, this judgment is not for the sake of condemnation but for the sake of grace, so that we might turn away from sin and toward life (see *DV* 27.4).

After accomplishing this preliminary work, the Spirit fulfills his mission in the proper sense: that is, the Holy Spirit offers us the new covenant in Christ, opens us up to friendship with God. When we live within the covenantal relation with God, we live the life of the freedom of God's children. The Father and the Son take up their dwelling place within us. The love of God is poured out into our hearts. In this situation, we achieve our true destiny, to live in a relationship of filial praise to the Father. The Pope expresses it in this way:

Against this background of the "image and likeness" of God, "the gift of the Spirit" ultimately means *a call to friendship*, in which the transcendent "depths of God" become in some way opened up to participation on the part of man. The Second Vatican Council teaches, "The invisible God out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with himself." (*Dei Verbum* 2) (*DV* 34)

The second obvious consequence of the gift of the Spirit is that the love of God overflows from us into love of neighbor. As St. John stresses in his First Letter, we cannot truly love God if we do not love our neighbor. Therefore, the sincere gift of self which we make to the Lord in the obedience of faith becomes in its turn a sincere gift of self to our neighbor. If, as St. Ignatius proposed, we see our world as a vast battlefield in which Christ and Satan clash, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to transform society, so that our world is no longer ruled by violence and exploitation, by the universal struggle of classes, but is rather

governed by the principle of solidarity. It is this principle which the Pope proposes as the way forward for humankind at the beginning of the third millennium. As he writes in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, "Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a *firm and persevering determination* to commit oneself to the *common good*; that is to say, the good of all and each individual, because we are all responsible to all" (SRS 38.6). We could say that this is the path along which the Holy Spirit is leading us. Solidarity, especially with the poor and the suffering, the marginalized and the victims of injustice, is the social meaning of our Christian freedom in the Holy Spirit.

The New Adam and the New Eve

We have seen that much of the Pope's anthropology is based upon the theme of the image of God in Genesis. He also builds upon the Adam/Christ and the Eve/Mary typology. This is not so surprising, since this typology is itself related to the theme of *imago Dei*. A key passage can be found in *Dominum et Vivificantem*, where the Pope writes:

It can be said that in this sin the "*mysterium iniquitatis*" has its beginning, but it can also be said that this is the sin concerning which the redemptive power of the "*mysterium pietatis*" becomes particularly clear and efficacious. This is expressed by St. Paul, when he *contrasts* the "*disobedience*" of the first Adam with the "*obedience*" of Christ, the second Adam: "obedience unto death." (cf. Rom 5:19; Phil 2:8) (DV 33.1)

Here once again, we find expressed in different words the fundamental truth of the human vocation, what the Pope calls obedience. This is the obedience of faith, of which Paul speaks. But from all we have seen thus far, this is not a servile obedience, a heteronomous obedience, which threatens human freedom. It is

the obedience of the surrender of self to God in which we find our deepest selves. This is the mystery of the human.

The same obedience is the key to the identity of Mary, who, for the Pope, becomes the model of human perfection and the key to understanding the vocation of woman. In his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, he wrote, Mary as “the woman” is the archetype of the whole human race in her “yes” to God’s plan for humanity and for her in particular (see *Mulieris Dignitatem* 4). In *Redemptoris Mater* he refers specifically to the Adam and Eve typology by citing *Lumen Gentium*, which in its turn is citing St. Irenaeus:

It goes right back to “the beginning,” and as a sharing in the sacrifice of Christ — the new Adam — it becomes in a certain sense the *counterpoise to the disobedience and disbelief* embodied in the sin of our first parents. Thus teach the Fathers of the Church and especially St. Irenaeus, quoted by the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*: “The knot of Eve’s disobedience was untied by Mary’s obedience; what the virgin Eve bound through her unbelief, the Virgin Mary *loosened by her faith*” (*RM* 19.1).

What the Pope emphasizes in his encyclical on Mary is her faith. She is a model of the Church and a model for Christians because she believed in the promise. In the Pope’s words, “In the expression ‘Blessed is she who believed,’ we can therefore rightly find a *kind of key* which unlocks for us the innermost reality of Mary, whom the angel hailed as ‘full of grace’ ”(*RM* 19.2). As human beings, therefore, we are all summoned to walk the road which Mary walked, to imitate her “yes” to God’s loving design for the world and for our lives.

In his encyclical on Mary, the Pope only hints at how Mary is a model for women. He merely notes in passing that Mary of Nazareth sheds light on womanhood as such, since God entrusted his Son to her. He simply mentions that the church sees in women, following in the footsteps of Mary, the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: “the self-offering totality of

love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement” (*RM* 46.2).

In the Pope’s thinking, motherhood plays a pivotal role in the feminine vocation. The motherhood of Mary is linked closely to woman’s call to motherhood. Mary was elected from eternity to be the Mother of Christ. Her motherhood was fulfilled in a new spiritual way when Christ gave her to the beloved disciple as a sign of her new spiritual motherhood, as mother of the Church and all believers. And woman, not man, is called to carry new life in her womb. It is this vocation which seems to ground many of woman’s greatest virtues as seen by the Pope: a unique ability to love and be faithful, an instinctive sense of the value of life, an intuitive openness to relationship which respects the value of the other.

It may be objected that the Pope does not appropriate the insights of feminism, and some might feel that his picture of women is a bit stereotyped. But he is certainly a prophetic voice calling on contemporary cultures to “acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation” (*EV* 99.1). These words are succinct, but their implications are enormous.

Pope John Paul’s fundamental teaching about women is that they are not objects but persons. He excoriates the idea of male domination of women, especially as sex objects. As women are called to fulfill themselves in marriage and motherhood, they are called to form a “*communio personarum*.” One of the great contributions of John Paul’s *magisterium* is to remind us all of woman’s fundamental dignity as person. Men and women are diverse in their sexual identity, but they are one at a deeper level: in their call to that sincere gift of self, which in marriage and parenthood becomes the most perfect image in this world of the life of the Trinity, the perfect communion of persons in faithful love and fruitfulness.

The Value of Work

We have been arguing that John Paul II’s theology is anthropological. Nowhere is this more true than in the sphere of work.

In the nineteenth century, human beings, including women and children, were often exploited by the emerging capitalistic system. In the twentieth century, workers continue to be exploited, but workers also lose their human dignity because of unemployment. In this historical context the Pope reminds us that "in the final analysis it is always man who is *the purpose of work*" (LE 6.6).

On a philosophical plane, the Pope recognizes that work is always an objectivization of the human subject. This objectivization has value insofar as it is the expression of the human subject. Work has value because it is the work of *men and women*. In the Pope's words:

The basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person. The sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension, not in the objective one. (LE 6.5)

On the theological level, there are two bases for the meaning of work. We have already seen that the Pope emphasizes the vocation of men and women as *imago Dei*, building on Genesis 1:26-27. He spells this out even more in appealing to Genesis 1:28, to the Lord's command to have dominion over the earth. Human beings fulfill this command precisely through work. In this way, they realize their being as images of God; that is, they share in the creative power of God. Here the Pope is launching a fairly new line of development in Christian thinking about work. Genesis sees work as part of the curse laid upon humankind by sin (Gen 3:17-19). The Pope does not deny this. In fact, he appeals to the paschal mystery to redeem the negative aspect of work. In work, which is often back-breaking and even death-dealing, we can share in the cross of Christ. But the Pope does not stop here. Work is not just negative. It is also a way in which we share in God's Being as Creator.

But work also has another Christological dimension. Jesus himself redeemed the value of work by spending most of his life as a carpenter. All of us human beings have to work in one way or another. In doing so, we can unite our work to that done by

Jesus Himself. As part of the plan of the Incarnation, Jesus did not shy away from work but gave it a redemptive value by fully participating in it. This is another way in which we can verify the truth affirmed by *Gaudium et Spes* 22: "By His Incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man."

The Human Person and Society

Pope John Paul II will probably be remembered especially for his social teaching, and he has devoted a number of encyclicals specifically to this dimension of the human. It would be beyond the scope of this essay to give a developed account of the Pope's *magisterium* in this area, but we can highlight a few points, especially where the Pope develops new insights into the Church's teaching.

Much of the Pope's thinking is both a commentary on and an *aggiornamento* of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Church set its face against socialism and was a vigorous defender of private property. While defending the right of private property, John Paul II notes that this is not an absolute right of human beings. This right must be exercised within the context of the common good (*LE* 14.2; *CA* 6.3, 30.3).

The Pope's teaching continues to reject "real socialism" as it was practiced in the Eastern bloc. One of the reasons for this is that this system was built on atheism and left a spiritual vacuum. Such a system could never promote the genuine good of human beings. But the Pope also rejects it on humanistic grounds. This system does not give absolute priority to the person. It is a collectivist system in which the person becomes a cog in a machine.

Although the Pope does reject socialism, it is too facile to think that he is advocating capitalism as such. He sees some significant flaws in capitalism as it is practiced at present throughout the world. For example, the richer nations have more purchasing power and can satisfy their needs at the expense of poorer ones. Moreover, even in rich countries, there are poor persons who are not able to develop the skills or the education needed for self-sufficiency. In these countries, government has a strict obligation to help those who would otherwise perish. Thus, although the Pope in general favors a free market economy, he notes that:

there are many human needs which find no place on the market. It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied, and not to allow those burdened by such needs to perish. It is also necessary to help those needy people to acquire expertise, to enter the circle of exchange, and to develop their skills in order to make the best use of their capacities and resources. Even prior to the logic of a fair exchange of goods and the forms of justice appropriate to it, there exists *something which is due to man because he is man*, by reason of his lofty dignity. (CA 34.1)

It is interesting that John Paul specifically teaches that it is not the Church's responsibility to favor one economic system or another, nor to provide concrete solutions for social problems. It is the Church's mission to offer a vision of the human person and to allow Christians to judge social systems in the light of this vision. In his words:

The Church does not propose economic and political systems or programs, nor does she show preference for one or the other, provided that human dignity is preserved and promoted, and provided she herself is allowed the room she needs to exercise her ministry in the world. (SRS 41.1)

In her social teaching, the Church does not offer the technical expertise of the empirical sciences but the prophetic voice of a community of faith.

The Call to Justice and Mercy

For me, the most beautiful of the Pope's encyclicals is *Dives in Misericordia*, which contains a profound reflection on God's mercy and a moving meditation upon the parable of the Prodigal Son. After our analysis of the Pope's social teaching, it would be

useful to say a word about justice and mercy, since this theme is important for the Church's social *magisterium*. Obviously, a fundamental part of that doctrine is the necessity of justice. There can be no authentic liberation of persons without justice. But the Pope warns us that justice alone is not enough. Justice must be supplemented by mercy, for if we stop at justice, we could find ourselves in a situation of bitterness where the oppressed loses his dignity by failing to forgive and where the oppressor loses his dignity by failing to be converted.

John Paul observes that very often programs which start from the idea of justice in practice suffer from distortions. Although they appeal to justice, it often happens that other forces gain the upper hand over justice. The fundamental motive for justice can turn out to be spite, hatred and even cruelty. He writes:

The experience of the past and of our own time demonstrates that justice alone is not enough, that it can even lead to the negation and destruction of itself, if *that deeper power, which is love*, is not allowed to shape human life in its various dimensions. (*DM* 12.3)

In another significant passage, John Paul notes that the man or woman who receives mercy is in no way denigrated. For it is equally true that the person who shows mercy is a beneficiary. The gift that he receives is the redeemed humanity of his brother or sister. The father of the Prodigal Son receives as well as gives. His son is restored to him in his full human dignity. As the Pope notes, what binds the bestower of mercy and the recipient of it is the human dignity of the two persons (see *DM* 6.4). In his words,

He who forgives and he who is forgiven encounter one another at an essential point, namely the dignity or essential value of the person, a point which cannot be lost and the affirmation of which, or its rediscovery, is a source of the greatest joy. (*DM* 14.11)

In light of these reflections, one can only applaud the Pope's summons to the contemporary Church to be a herald of God's mercy, to put it into practice herself, and to summon all of our brothers and sisters not only to do the works of justice but to let justice come to its full fruition in healing mercy.

Conclusion

We noted that from the beginning of his pontificate, John Paul II affirmed that "man is the way for the Church" (*RH* 14.3). Even a hasty reading of the twelve encyclicals of his ministry would reveal that he has been faithful to his original inspiration. The Pope's vision of the human vocation is consonant with the great Christian tradition, and it is built upon the theme of *imago Dei* as found in Genesis and in Jesus as the new Adam as developed in the Pauline corpus. What is perhaps unique to the Pope is his meditative style, often in the form of a *lectio divina*, as seen, for example, in his reading of the story of the Prodigal Son in *Dives in Misericordia*, his meditation upon the rich young man in *Veritatis Splendor*, his reflection upon Mary as the model of faith in *Redemptoris Mater*, his interpretation of the role of the Holy Spirit in the light of John 16 in *Dominum et Vivificantem*. All in all, the anthropology of the present Pope is classical rather than innovative. At the same time he certainly strikes a prophetic note in many of his encyclicals: in his analysis of the world situation after 1989, in his uncompromising affirmation of the value of life in *Evangelium Vitae*, in his defense of moral absolutes in *Veritatis Splendor*, not to mention his renewed call to ecumenism and the missionary spirit to evangelize the gentiles and re-evangelize Christian Europe. In the best sense, we could say that the Pope fulfills the qualities of the wise steward in Matthew's gospel who brings forth from his storeroom things old and new (Mt 13:52).

Notes

1. I will use the following code for the encyclicals cited in this essay. *Redemptor Hominis* (*RH*); *Dives in Misericordia* (*DM*); *Laborem Exercens*

(*LE*); *Dominum et Vivificantem* (*DV*); *Redemptoris Mater* (*RM*); *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (*SRS*); *Centesimus Annus* (*CA*); *Veritatis Splendor* (*VS*); *Evangelium Vitae* (*EV*).

2. The official translations of papal documents use the words “man” and “mankind.” When citing these texts, I will retain this language. Otherwise I will seek to use inclusive language.

3. *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, ed. with introductions by J. Michael Miller, C.S.B. (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996), 24.

4. See *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7.

5. See James Keenan, “The Moral Argumentation of *Evangelium Vitae*,” in *In Choosing Life: A Dialogue on Evangelium Vitae*, ed. Kevin Wildes (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1997), 54.

6. In *Dominum et Vivificantem*, John Paul writes succinctly but poignantly, “The sin of the human beginning consists in untruthfulness and in the rejection of the gift and the love which determine the beginning of the world and of man” (*DV* 35.2).