

Karol Wojtyla: The Thought of the Man Who Became Pope John Paul II

Rocco Buttiglione

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As we head into the twilight of John Paul II's papacy, the Roman Catholic Church is beginning to appreciate more fully the blessing bestowed on it by the Holy Spirit in this pontificate. Since his election in 1979 the pope has guided the Church with an eye toward the new millennium. John Paul II has reformed the Church in many ways through his teachings and actions. We now have a magnificent opportunity to enter more deeply into John Paul's mind due to the painstaking work of Rocco Buttiglione.

Buttiglione, an Italian philosopher and theologian, Vatican diplomat, and now chair of the reformed Christian Democratic Union in Italy, served as an advisor to Pope John Paul II for several years before leaving that post for Italian politics. Although several works have been produced on the thought of John Paul II, none of them has the distinction of having been written by one who has both known the pontiff personally and who has mastered his philosophy and theology. It is no exaggeration to say that this work is truly definitive.

The book is divided into several chapters, each outlining an essential aspect of Wojtyla's thought. Subjects include Wojtyla's formation in Poland and educational background, analysis of seminal works such as *The Acting Person* and *Love and Responsibility*, narration of his role at the Second Vatican Council, and an examination of his poetry and plays. Throughout the book, Buttiglione explicates Wojtyla's personalism—the theological anthropology that constitutes the core of his writing and work.

In the first chapter the reader is presented with a brief history of Poland and the state of the Roman Catholic Church before and during Wojtyla's lifetime. According to Buttiglione, the Nazi invasion and the death camp of Auschwitz prompted Wojtyla's deep spiritual searching, as many—including Wojtyla—wondered whether Poland, or even mankind, could withstand the terror. This terror was not simply a matter of grieving over those murdered by the Fuhrer's fiat; it was instead a fundamental examination of the nation's conscience to determine whether humanity had abdicated its dignity. The Pope finds a unique

lesson in faith in this unlikely setting as he reflects on the selfless Maximillian Kolbe, who volunteered to substitute his life for that of another prisoner—a father of a large family. In Kolbe, Wojtyla finds the triumph of man applying the truth of Christ. John Paul II dedicates a moving homily to this respected and revered Pole, who was later canonized by him. Buttiglione uses the homily to demonstrate the fundamentals of Wojtyla's theology—a firm conviction in the dignity of man understood through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Buttiglione then moves to investigate Wojtyla's early life, focusing on Poland's culture and its influence upon him. From an early age, Wojtyla was exposed to numerous poets and playwrights, and cultivated a respect for the power of words. In the Rhapsodic Theater, Wojtyla performed in many of the classics of Polish literature, from which he gleaned many spiritual lessons. From the theater Wojtyla became involved with the Living Rosary, a group of fifteen devout men committed to Christian living. Later, Wojtyla joined the Polish Moral Resistance Movement against the Nazis and created intellectual weekly journals that trumpeted the Polish desire for freedom; this eventually led him to seek priestly ordination.

Buttiglione recounts Wojtyla's education after the war, entering the Angelicum, investigating Thomism, becoming impressed with the intellectual fruits of French Catholicism, and finally—although reluctantly—pursuing a second doctorate in philosophy, which was instrumental to exposing him to phenomenology. Buttiglione does a nice job of summarizing how the works of Saint John of the Cross and Max Scheler influenced Wojtyla. Scheler's work is given an especially detailed treatment, along with Wojtyla's critique of his system. Wojtyla's education led him to a teaching post at the Catholic University of Lublin followed by his elevation to Cardinal and election as Pope.

Throughout his analysis of *The Acting Person* and *Love and Responsibility*, Buttiglione endeavors to illuminate Wojtyla's personalism. Personalists seek to analyze the meaning and nature of personal existence. Yet, they acknowledge that human existence is ultimately a mystery. This assertion does not rule out meaningful exploration of that mystery, but it is a recognition that no theory or set of insights could ever fully explain or define the intricate dynamic that is human life. Wojtyla is keenly aware that in the soul of the human person we encounter both the transcendent and the infinite.

Buttiglione's book is of particular importance to the project of economic personalism at the Center for Economic Personalism in Grand Rapids, Michigan. First, Wojtyla is obviously the leading personalist of our age as well as the central inspiration for the work of the Center. His social encyclicals and work in social theory have provided the fundamental parameters for our own

research. Rocco Buttiglione enters the picture as my former professor and mentor who first introduced me to the work of Karol Wojtyła. Moreover, Buttiglione is a father of economic personalism himself as he has attempted to explicate the seminal work of the pontiff in his own scholarship. The two essential insights gained from my studies under Professor Rocco Buttiglione at the International Academy of Philosophy in Liechtenstein are: (1) that the greatest threat to the freedom of the West is moral relativism, and (2) that at the heart of economic science is the acting person—a being of great dignity that is open to the reality of morality. The monumental project of Christian social teaching is to create a social theory that affirms this dignity while avoiding the pervasive moral relativism of the age. These insights come to bear significantly in the science of economics.

Moral relativism has usurped a traditional understanding of truth. Where we once sought to make our judgments correspond to an objective reality, we now strive to make reality conform to our wishes—whatever they may be. As a result, the modern mind is unable to comprehend any sort of objective and universal truth claim. Our culture's embrace of relativism has led to a congenital distortion of freedom. Indeed, the course of the twentieth century could well be described as the history of the distortion of freedom.

In contrast, Buttiglione notes how the Pope offers a vision of freedom rooted in the truth about human nature. Genuine freedom is measured by our ability to choose the good in all areas of human life. His survey of the contemporary state of liberty has led him to conclude that the basic issue the West faces today is the responsible use of freedom in its political, economic, and cultural dimensions.

Economic freedom, in particular, raises questions about its responsible use. In fact, many today assert that economic liberty leads to economic injustice. How do we promote economic justice while protecting economic liberty? What economic system is most fitting for free persons? These are questions that have sustained Wojtyła's attention for many years.

Buttiglione notes that the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* marks the beginning of a "springtime in Catholic social thought" for recognizing the importance of economic freedom. Not only is it practically important to promote economic liberty; it is also morally obligatory. Free markets succeed because they permit the proper interaction of human capital (creativity, intelligence, and virtue) with natural capital (land, resources, and machinery). The harnessing of these two types of capital naturally results in a free market which, left to develop within a properly defined juridical and moral framework, proves to be the most effective and humane means of satisfying basic human needs. Besides

effectively producing wealth, free markets are also the most humane economic system possible, one that respects human dignity and all aspects of human freedom. A humane economy can only be achieved when economic structures are designed to provide avenues for men and women to exercise their freedom in relation to the truth about who they are.

In addition to the responsible exercise of economic freedom, a vibrant culture is the bedrock for human liberty. Such a culture can only be maintained if the institutions of family and church function freely and soundly. Our culture must understand and defend the notion of freedom in relation to the truth. Moral relativism is destroying our culture because it sabotages society's ability to discern right from wrong, thus making it more likely that people will abuse their freedom through irresponsible living.

As Pope John Paul II often asserts, authentic economic liberty is possible only on the basis of a rule of law and a correct understanding of the human person. If there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political and economic activity, then ideas and convictions can be manipulated easily for reasons of power. If the West persists in its slide toward moral relativism, it will eventually erode the safeguards of political and economic freedom. Relativists foolishly believe that the absence of truth best protects human freedom. Unfortunately, they actually open the door to anarchy or totalitarianism. In a world without truth, freedom loses its foundation and humanity is exposed to the violence of mass manipulation, coercion, and deception.

We, the defenders of liberty, must present a moral vision of a free society. The moral relativism of modern liberalism has left the West without ordered liberty. Our priority must be to capture the moral high ground for human liberty and place the ideas of individual and community freedom at the center of our political, cultural, and social life. There is no higher goal if we are to restore a concept of the common good.

Defenders of liberty must consider carefully such issues as the effects of high tax rates on the structure of the family and the community, and how government sometimes unwittingly contributes to moral decline. Free-market advocates must understand that efficiency is not the primary reason that free enterprise and market incentives are good for everyone. Their moral status stems from the fact that they protect the rights of property ownership and freedom of contract, and thus provide the incentive and means to care for the least among us.

John Paul II has been an ardent defender of authentic freedom. When the unthinkable—but inevitable—happens and his pontificate ends, the world may finally realize how blessed it has been for Buttiglione's interpretation of the

pontiff's theology and philosophy. Catholic theology will experience the impact of John Paul II's great mind, for decades to come. Buttiglione penetrates Wojtyla's mind and provides access to the subtleties of his thought. Readers of this volume can experience the same sense of hope for the future rooted in Christ's love that has enlivened John Paul II for decades.

*Church and Revolution: Catholics in the
Struggle for Democracy and Social Justice*

Thomas Bokenkotter

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The story of the Roman Catholic Church's transformation from entrenched defender of the *ancien régime* into one of the world's great advocates of democracy, freedom, and economic justice is indeed a remarkable one. In the century between Pius IX's 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* and the Vatican II documents *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church moved from vigorously condemning modern liberalism to issuing support for the principles of the free society. The history of Catholic social teaching has received considerable attention from scholars in recent years, especially in light of the encounter with theologies of liberation (and the responses issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in 1984 and 1986), the Church's central role in the revolution of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe, and John Paul II's strong advocacy of the free society in the 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. Thomas Bokenkotter's *Church and Revolution: Catholics in the Struggle for Democracy and Social Justice* is a useful addition to this literature on the development of Catholic social thought since the French Revolution. Bokenkotter identifies his specific objective for the book as understanding the Catholic Church's evolution from "one of the most conservative and even reactionary of the world powers" into "a very progressive force in world affairs."

Rather than examining the history of changes in official Catholic social teaching, a story that, as Bokenkotter points out, is well-documented and generally agreed upon by scholars, Bokenkotter focuses on the history of "progressive" social Catholicism as seen through the lives of approximately thirty leading