

# Topping: Three more reasons to celebrate St. John Paul II

Each one of us has his own reasons to celebrate. For my wife and me, as converts, the Feast of St. John Paul II on Oct. 22 recalls our own entry into the Church. Our first meeting with the saint came, unexpectedly, at his funeral. Months earlier we had planned a pilgrimage to Rome. Just hours before we were set to travel, the pope died. So to Rome we went along with the millions of other young Catholics we would there encounter.

In the end, it was that seemingly chance encounter with the Holy Father as he laid down his life one last time for his flock that proved the final grace we needed 13 years ago to say our 'yes' to Christ and to say our 'yes' to full communion with Christ's bride, the Catholic Church.

For all of us, though, this year marks three public anniversaries connected with the gift of John Paul II's legacy – gifts given through papal teachings. In an age of moral confusion, his writings serve as an abiding witness: that it is only where freedom is ordered to truth that happiness is to be found.

## *Humanae Vitae*: A 50th Anniversary

John Paul II was not the public author of *Humanae Vitae*, 50 years ago, but much of his ministry can be seen as a meditation upon its implications. Pope John Paul II was truly the pope of the family. No other Bishop of Rome had devoted as much effort toward evangelizing the family and reinvigorating lasting love between men and women as did he.



St. John Paul II

When *Humanae Vitae* was published in 1968 headlines across the globe delivered a myopic message: "Pope Bans Pill". That was true. Paul VI had come out against artificial contraception. Nothing novel here. All Christians prior to 1930 rejected sterilization. You didn't need a prophet to predict where separating sex from babies would lead, as it has. As Mahatma Gandhi warned already in 1925, "Any large use of the methods (of artificial contraception) is likely to result in the dissolution of the marriage bond."

But *Humanae Vitae's* 'no' was less than half the message. As John Paul II tirelessly illustrated through his weekly audiences, the Church's 'no' to sterile sex was only to make way for her more lusty 'yes' to redeeming human love. Secular voices taunted that the Church opposed sex; John Paul II argued the Church defends tender intimacy. Secular voices charged that the Church thwarted love; John Paul II argued the Church guards permanent friendship. Secular voices claimed that the Church denied the body; John Paul II argued the Church remains one of the last champions of the flesh.

Against the sexual libertines and the transhumanists, John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* took up themes from *Humanae Vitae* and repropounded them for a world weary from chasing a freedom without order and appetites without satisfaction.

#### ***Veritatis Splendor: A 25th Anniversary***

Between 1968 and 1993 the Church in the West witnessed up close the first fruits of the sexual revolution: sterilization, abortion, divorce, gay marriage, euthanasia. These were novel possibilities in the era leading up to *Humanae Vitae*. Over the following decades their grim realities became plain. John Paul II would memorably call the ideas and institutions that supported their advance, "the culture of death". The efforts of his pontificate, and of the new evangelization more generally, would be to galvanize and advance what he termed "the culture of life".

*Veritatis Splendor* provides an intellectual foundation for that new culture. In the first half of the 20th century we in the West had won freedom from godless totalitarian regimes. Paradoxically, over the second half of the 20th century, we began to make peace with godless cultural regimes.

For some, this still-born peace was accepted in the name of abstract freedom; for others, peace with the sexual revolution was brokered on the grounds of a misconstrued sense of Christian toleration, or perhaps 'mercy'.

It is not as though the West had wholly abandoned God. Through the 1970s and 1980s birth rates began to plummet and seminaries declined (some 200 in the U.S. closed in this era) at that same time that religious sisters still filled many of our schools and we Catholics still operated an astonishing range of hospitals, adoption agencies, and colleges. For many in the Church, the shift was hard to see. Even so, secular culture had shifted. So had much of culture of the Church.

The scandals of recent months have exposed something of the moral decay of priestly life over those decades. (A Jesuit priest friend told me that when he was in the seminary in the 1970s, his novice master would take up with the new lads.) The scandals don't reflect the formation of all seminarians of that time, but they do illustrate something of the spirit of those years. Needless to say, unless young clergy looked elsewhere for inspiration, men formed by such teachers were hardly being equipped to challenge the "culture of death". JP II's *Veritatis Splendor* offered such inspiration.

It was into this cultural context that John Paul II proposed his own analysis of the relationship between freedom and truth.

"Certain tendencies in contemporary moral theology, under the influence of the currents of subjectivism and individualism...involve novel interpretations of the relationship of freedom to the moral law, human nature and conscience, and propose novel criteria for the moral evaluation of acts. Despite their variety, these tendencies are at one in lessening or even denying *the dependence of freedom on truth.*" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 34)

Far from severing freedom from truth, the pope insisted, the Church can never stop proposing their intimate connection:

Although each individual has a right to be respected in his own journey in search of the truth, there exists a prior moral obligation, and a grave one at that, to seek the truth and to adhere to it once it is known. As Cardinal John Henry Newman, that outstanding defender of the rights of conscience, forcefully put it: "Conscience has rights because it has duties" (VS, 34)

Conscience has rights because it has duties. Freedom brings happiness insofar as it cleaves to truth. Still, many wondered: how do we know truth can be found?

#### ***Fides et Ratio: A 20th Anniversary***

The question of truth is the subject of John Paul II's third anniversary document, written 20 years ago. After defending the dignity of sex, and the objective connection between freedom and the moral law, the saint devoted this final magisterial document whose anniversary we mark to the defence of reason and its essential harmony with faith.

"Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves." (*Fides et Ratio*)

Thus proclaimed John Paul the Great at the opening of his ambitious and glorious manifesto on the grandeur of reason's metaphysical range. Where the first two encyclicals spoke truth to specific moral questions, this document

encourages Christians and all men to hope that truth *itself* is still possible to find.

Anniversaries mark gifts given. What gifts from these encyclicals abide? For those wishing to find an anchor in troubling times, I think a great many.

Any credible analysis of contemporary culture has to take into account conflicting impulses. Kindness and cruelty, radical autonomy and totalitarian leanings, pride at the progress of science as well as dread at the possibility of destroying human life – these and more mix in the heart of us modern people.

One reason for this interior conflict is that modernity is not one thing. Indeed, the secular West is better thought of as a vast hall filled with good things that now combine and crash into one another, like the chaotic notes of a symphony that is exercising its instruments without the aid of a score. Without confidence in reason, the very idea of a ‘score’ looks absurd, even in the Church.

Despite secular culture’s radical plurality, John Paul II and Benedict XVI both argued that this culture is united by a single assumption: reason cannot be trusted. This assumption lies at the basis of our inability to order what increasingly appear to us as conflicting goods. This assumption accounts for some of our present confusion about the demands of faith and Christian discipleship.

Reason still operates for us in the West. But from our universities to our legislatures, it is a reason devoid of metaphysical power. It cannot lead us to ‘big’ truths. Our young people are taught that reason cannot know whether God, or Beauty, or the soul exists, or whether sex is not just a game whose rules we make up as we go.

Catholics too are being infected with this spirit of our age. You will not hear in Church that God is dead. But you will hear this same skepticism sung to settings in alternate keys. You hear it whenever the ‘pastoral’ is separated from the doctrinal; you hear it whenever you are told that the ‘context’ of sin makes basic norms irrelevant; you hear it whenever ‘mercy’ is pitted against justice; you hear it when we are asked to ‘accompany’ people as though some paths don’t, in fact, lead off the edge of a perilous cliff.

Such denials of truth finally lead to despair. No civilization, no local church, can long survive if it cannot or will not give reasoned answers to the purpose of its striving. To celebrate ‘freedom’ or ‘mercy’ without confidence of discovering truth is little better than condemning man to the slavery of his passions, or at least to the passions of the strong.

John Paul II’s anniversary encyclicals are a summons to all of us, those inside and those outside of the Church, to hope: hope that truth may be found, hope that freedom has an end, and hope that, even in the face of terrifying evils, the Church remains the custodian of the truth that sets us free.

We all have reasons to celebrate the life of St. John Paul II. This year of splendid anniversaries gives us three more. John Paul II, *ora pro nobis*

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