

## **Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz**

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### **John Paul II ahead of his time**

In his lifetime, John Paul II was often reproached for having his eyes fixed on the past, for not understanding the present and for not keeping up with the world. Admittedly, his role in the communism overthrowing was widely recognised, but it was also believed that he was unable to find his place in the world of democracy and pluralism, in the global market of ideas where the Catholic Church must seek attention of people on an equal footing with others.

Today, however, fifteen years after he left for the House of the Father, we can see with what perspicacity he was analysing the reality, and how accurate were his predictions of the problems we are facing today. When the communist system in Europe was collapsing, most intellectuals expressed universal optimism, in the conviction that the era political and ideological confrontations was ending for good, and that from then on, a golden age of liberal democracy would continue without any more disturbances. It was then fashionable to talk about “the end of history”.

Nevertheless, the Holy Father did not give in to such euphoria, calling the Marxist collectivism (for example, in “Crossing the Threshold of Hope”) a “worse edition” of a broader programme that had dominated the public life in the West for three centuries, aimed in essence at erasing God and religion from the public space. The history of the 20th century shows that such a struggle did not end well for the humanity; on the contrary, it brought many tragedies.

The events that followed have proved John Paul II right: not only had he accurately diagnosed the illnesses afflicting the Western world, but he was also able to point out to remedies. In his opinion, the world’s future will not be decided on battlefields but, above all, in the bosom of families, and it will depend on the quality of relations with our loved ones. For this reason he elevated studies on the phenomenon of the family to the rank of an academic science. The theology of the body he developed became an in-depth, comprehensive and tested response to the identity crisis we are currently witnessing in the sphere of human sexuality.

The problem can be seen especially among young people who have difficulties in entering adulthood, since the contemporary Western culture has lost its traditional models of initiation, i.e., reaching maturity. John Paul II was the first world leader to identify young people as a separate social group, and addressed his message to them on the occasion of cyclical World Youth Days and numerous meetings with young people held during his pilgrimages around the world. In this way he helped to raise an entire generation of young people with no fathers and no masters in life; he taught them what maturation essentially is: discovering one's own identity, vocation, meaning and purpose in life.

In times of progressive atomisation and anomie of social life, he was focusing on solidarity as a fundamental rule of collective life. For him, it was a social translation of love, inspired by the words of Saint Paul: “Carry one another’s burdens”. He helped us discover how many social virtues are rooted in the Gospel. Therefore, to renew them today it is necessary to return to the source.

It seems that the philosophical principle that has governed the order of his attitude to the world was personalism, building one’s life primarily on personal relationships, first of all with the person of God himself, and then with other people. Such approach excludes any instrumentalisation of the person used for mercantilist or political ends. It was from this point of view that John Paul II judged various sociological and economic systems, analysing whether they did degrade a human being into a mere role of producer or consumer.

This personalism of the Pope refers us to the “First Person”, the person of God himself, whose primary quality in relation to all creatures is Mercy. It is not by chance that it became one of the main theological and pastoral motives of his pontificate. This was pointed out by Benedict XVI in his special letter on the centenary of the birth of John Paul II in which he called Mercy “the true centre, from the perspective of which we can read the message contained in the various texts”.

It can be also read in the words spoken by the Pope in 2002 in the sanctuary of Łagiewniki, which still resound today: “In every continent, from the depth of human suffering, a cry for mercy seems to rise up. Where hatred and the thirst for revenge dominate, where war brings suffering and death to the innocent, there the grace of mercy is needed in order to settle human minds and hearts and to bring about peace. Wherever respect for life and human dignity are lacking, there is need of God’s merciful love, in whose light we see the inexpressible value of every human being. Mercy is needed in order to ensure that every injustice in the world will come to an end in the splendour of truth”.

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