

Behold the Man

The Philosophy of Pope John Paul II



Freedom and Truth

by John F. Crosby



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The Berlin Wall

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"Behold the Man" is a ten-part series on the personalist philosophy of Pope John Paul II. This is the sixth installment.

We live as persons by acting through ourselves in freedom: This is the aspect of Pope John Paul II's personalism that we examined in the last installment. John Paul also teaches that there is a law of freedom, which he calls the "truth about good." Though people are afraid that this law will interfere with their freedom, it is in fact the basis for living in freedom, as we shall try to show in the present installment.

Coercion vs. Persuasion

Let us suppose that some zealous Christians come into an area where the native people have never heard of Christianity, and that they proceed to force these people to profess the Christian faith and to live the Christian life. The coerced converts would be living in accordance with the objective truth all right, but they would not be liberated by the truth. They would feel oppressed by Christianity, even though it is the very truth of God. The problem of course is that their own judgment has been bypassed; they have not been given a chance to see the truth of Christianity for themselves. So this is the first thing to understand about John Paul's "truth about good": It empowers us to act freely only if we understand it and choose it on the basis of understanding it; if it is imposed on us, then it interferes with our freedom. It is, then, the "understood truth about good" that is the correctly expressed law of our freedom.

One sees why John Paul in his encyclical on the missionary activity of the Church says that the Church does not go out to the nations to *impose* revealed truth on them, but to *propose* it to them. Only in this way does the truth about good become the friend of the freedom of persons. In general John Paul distinguishes in his personalism between *coercion* and *persuasion*. Though coercion is sometimes unavoidable in human affairs, John Paul nevertheless wants coercion to be replaced by persuasion as far as possible. He often reflects on the particular respect shown to persons when we make a point of influencing them by means of persuasion. For if we give them a good reason for acting in a certain way, a reason that they can understand, then they now have as much a motive for acting in that way as we ourselves do. Their acting in that way is not an extension of our acting, as it is when we coerce them, but it is truly their own act. If there were no such thing as the truth about good, there would be no such thing as persuasion; we could influence each other only by way of coercion.

Let us see how John Paul practices what he preaches. We all know how deeply committed he is to the teaching of the Church on the objective evil of contraception, as set forth in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. But he has not tried to uphold this teaching simply by "laying down the law," by threatening punishments, and the like. He thinks that that is just the approach that

makes the moral law seem to people to cramp their freedom. He takes a different approach. On one occasion he said: "It is not enough that this encyclical be faithfully and fully proposed, *but it also is necessary to devote oneself to demonstrating its deepest reasons.*" He knows that the teaching of the encyclical is rooted in the truth about man and woman, and he wants nothing more than to make this truth understandable to the people of our time.

If we do not succeed in understanding this truth, then the Church's prohibition of contraception will seem to us to be outside of us and will be experienced as an imposition. But if we understand how this teaching grows out of the truth about man and woman, and how we *live in the truth of our own being* by living in accordance with the teaching, then we internalize it, that is, we make it our own. As a result, we are fully free in living it, even when it requires considerable sacrifice from us. In his major philosophical treatise, John Paul reflects on this process of making the truth our own, and says: "The tension arising between the objective order of norms and the inner freedom of the person is relieved by truth, by the conviction of the truthfulness of good. But this tension is, on the contrary, intensified and not relieved by external pressures, by the power of injunction and compulsion."

Hence the supreme pastoral importance of showing forth in a convincing way the truthfulness of the moral norms taught by the Church. John Paul takes the faithful seriously as persons by leading them beyond blind obedience and educating them to the rational obedience that makes them free.

This of course does not mean that a Catholic is excused from a moral teaching of the Church that he does not yet fully understand. It just means that the faithful, if they want to live in freedom, should do everything they can to develop their understanding of the moral norms taught by the Church, and that the Church for her part should do all that she can to support this development of understanding.

The Divine Pedagogy

John Paul often dwells on the fact that God Himself wants human persons to understand the truth they live by. He does not make them blind instruments of His plans, but reveals to them something of His counsels so as to make them His collaborators. Here is a striking example of the personalist pedagogy that John Paul detects in God. In his book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, he asks in one chapter, "Why is there so much evil in the world?" He begins his answer saying: "One response could be that God does not need to justify Himself to man. It is enough that He is omnipotent. From this perspective everything He does or allows must be accepted. This is the position of the biblical Job."

But John Paul is not satisfied with this response, and so he proceeds to suggest a very different one: "But God, who besides being Omnipotence is Wisdom and Love, desires to justify Himself to mankind." That is an absolutely extraordinary statement, the likes of which I have never seen in a Catholic writer: "God desires to justify Himself to mankind"! That is, God wants man to cry out, "Why, O God, why," when man suffers, He wants man to understand something of the divine meaning of the suffering that afflicts him, and to live in the freedom that comes from this understanding.

John Paul is bound to think of John 15:15 when he presents this part of his personalist philosophy: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." In taking us as friends and not servants, Christ also takes us as persons, making us free in the truth that He reveals to us.

We said that people are afraid of the truth about good because they think it will cramp their freedom. They are also afraid of it because they think that those who have strong convictions concerning the truth about good are sure to resort to coercion against those who disagree with

them about this truth. The fear is that if you think you know something about the truth about good, you are bound to be intolerant of all those who deny the truth that you affirm. You can be gentle and tolerant toward your neighbors only if you doubt that there is any such thing as truth about good.

Nonviolence

We have already given one response to this objection: We showed that persuasion as distinct from coercion is only possible on the basis of appealing to such truth; if the truth is not there to appeal to, nothing but coercion remains when people want to influence each other. Here is another response based not on theory, but on history. John Paul sees great significance in the fact that the Communist establishment in Poland was brought down not by the force of arms, nor by any kind of violence, but by the moral witness of the Polish workers to the truth. In a situation where many thought that nothing but force would avail, one was able to achieve a complete victory by appealing to the consciences of the adversaries. John Paul has written:

"The fall of this kind of bloc or empire was accomplished almost everywhere by means of peaceful protest, using only the weapons of truth and justice. While Marxism held that only by exacerbating social conflicts was it possible to resolve them through violent confrontation, the protests which led to the collapse of Marxism tenaciously insisted on trying every avenue of negotiation, dialogue, and witness to the truth, appealing to the conscience of the adversary and seeking to reawaken in him a sense of shared human dignity."

The truth about good, far from necessarily leading to intolerant coercion, provides the only real alternative to all such coercion; it makes possible the act whereby one person appeals to the truth about good in dispute with another person, trying to persuade the other. This appeal can even be made to one's enemy, who can be challenged in his conscience and can be spiritually overcome by the force of the truth about good. ■