

Behold the Man

The Philosophy of Pope John Paul II



Flying with Both Wings

Why Christians Need Philosophy

by John F. Crosby

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Dr. John F. Crosby is the chairman of the Philosophy Department at Franciscan University of Steubenville. He is also a member of CUF's board of directors.

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

We don't have to listen to Pope John Paul II for long before noticing his fascination with the human person. We are struck by how often and how passionately he speaks about the dignity of the person. He has become a kind of prophet of personal dignity, witnessing to it before the conscience of mankind like no other world leader, indeed, like no previous pope. In fact, this affirmation of the person is perhaps the greatest single theme in all his thought and teaching. We can't begin to understand him if we do not understand this theme.

Now when Pope John Paul II speaks about the person, he, of course, announces the faith of the Church, the faith entrusted to the apostles. He speaks about the dignity persons have as images of God, as brothers and sisters of the God-man, Jesus Christ. He can't quote often enough the text from Vatican II that says that Christ reveals man to man himself. But, if we listen closely, we will find that he not only speaks from the point of view of faith—there is something more in his teaching. What is it?

Let us look at the striking opening line of Pope John Paul II's latest encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth." Notice: not faith alone, but faith *and* reason. It is not Catholic to say we want only faith and we leave reason to the pagans; the Catholic way is faith and reason. And, by reason, the encyclical means

philosophical reason. Pope John Paul II is not speaking of reason as exercised by the natural sciences such as biology or chemistry; he is not saying that faith and natural science are two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth. Though he has shown throughout his pontificate great esteem for the natural sciences, they do not represent one of the two wings. Rather, he means that it is faith and philosophical reason that are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.

It follows from the logic of this metaphor that faith is bound to suffer when philosophical reason is neglected. Thus we read in *Fides et Ratio*: "[D]eprived of reason, faith has stressed feeling and experience, and so runs the risk of no longer being a universal proposition." He says in another place in the encyclical that the Church cannot even articulate her faith without employing the resources of philosophy. In fact, he stresses the importance of philosophy for *evangelization*. When we Catholics first address non-believers, we cannot simply quote the Bible and the magisterial teaching of the Church; we begin by seeking out our first common ground with them by means of philosophical reason, which non-believers share with believers. It is on just this common ground of reason that Pope John Paul II stands when, for example, he addresses the General Assembly of the United Nations.

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Here, then, is the other thing that we can detect in Pope John Paul II's proclamation of the truth about the human person: Besides announcing the faith of the Church, he also uses philosophical reason to understand the person more deeply and to explain the truth about the person more convincingly. He has developed an entire personalist philosophy and constantly employs it in his addresses and writings.

The purpose of this *Lay Witness* series is to introduce the reader to the personalist philosophy of Pope John Paul II. By following this series, you will be able to find more in the Holy Father's teachings the next time you read them, and thus understand him more deeply. You may also enrich your own faith by learning to fly with the wings of both faith and reason.

Pope John Paul II thinks that it is especially important at the beginning of the 21st century to give attention to philosophy, including the philosophy of the person. In *Fides et Ratio*, he acknowledges that philosophy has fallen on hard times. Many philosophers no longer believe in philosophy; they deny that philosophy can establish any firm result; they deny that it can contribute to our understanding of the meaning of existence. They have, in effect, despaired of philosophy.

Even you and I are much more affected by this loss of confidence in philosophical reason than we realize. For example, when we talk about the human embryo, we tend to think that our one source of knowledge about the embryo is biology, or the branch of it called embryology. We think that if we go beyond embryology in our understanding of the embryo and affirm that the embryo is a person with rights, *then we do so by means of faith*. In other words, we tend to think that the two sources for our understanding of the embryo are science and faith. We entirely overlook philosophy and all that we can understand about the human embryo by means of philosophical reason.

And so the Holy Father sees it as one of his most important pastoral tasks to exhort philosophers to dare to do philosophy again. It is an unusual position for a pope to be in. At the end of the last century, Pope Leo XIII had to resist the arrogance of reason and defend the faith of the Church against rationalistic intrusions. But, at the end of this past century, Pope John Paul II had to defend reason against unreason. He knows how much faith needs reason, and so he cannot remain indifferent to a situation in which people have lost confidence in reason. What concerns us in this series is that we Christians can't do justice to the human person without restoring philosophy to its proper place and letting it collaborate with faith more than we are used to doing.

Pope John Paul II is ideally suited to lead us into the philosophy of the person. He is a philosopher-pope like no previous successor of St. Peter. Besides the usual seminary studies in philosophy, Pope John Paul II went much deeper into philosophy after his ordination to the priesthood. His bishop, recognizing his unusual talent, sent him to the Jagellonian University in Cracow, where he studied modern and contemporary philosophy more deeply than any other modern pope. He was especially fascinated by the personalist philosophy of the German Catholic thinker, Max Scheler (1874-1928), who, in important ways, strongly influenced the young Karol Wojtyla's understanding of the human person. Even as Auxiliary Bishop of Cracow, and later as Archbishop of Cracow, he wrote and published one philosophical study after another on the human person and on the moral life. He wrote a major treatise on personalist philosophy called *The Acting Person*. He held the chair in ethics at the Catholic University in Lublin up until the time of his election as pope. In his years as Bishop of Cracow, he found time to offer various courses in ethics and personalist philosophy in Lublin. He was, then, *the* pope to

write the encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*. And he is *the* pope to teach us about all that philosophy can give us Christians for the understanding of the human person.

Notice that Pope John Paul II teaches us by his example as well as by what he writes. His work in philosophy is not like a hobby, something he has pursued next to his work as pastor. As we have seen, it enters everywhere into his teaching as pope. He would not be the pope he is but for his deep formation in philosophy. His way of articulating the truth about the human person and of giving prophetic witness to the dignity of the person is profoundly formed by his philosophy of the person. We would not be increasingly calling him "John Paul the Great" if it weren't for the depth that his teaching has because of its philosophical dimension. He gives an example to the whole Church by the way in which he brings together faith and philosophical reason in himself.

Some of you may be eager to read this series on Pope John Paul's personalist philosophy, but may be unclear as to just what philosophy is. It is a sign of the eclipse of philosophy in our time that many intelligent people no longer know what it is. I won't try right now to give you an abstract definition of philosophy, but rather will offer what is called an ostensive definition of it. That is, in future installments I'll raise questions of personalist philosophy and discuss them philosophically with you. From these discussions you will gather what philosophy is and will then understand why it has always had a special place in the life of the Church.

Others of you may feel intimidated at the thought of studying philosophy. You may have the idea that philosophy is very difficult to understand and can be studied only by a few highly trained specialists. And it's true that some of Pope John Paul's writings are not easy to read and understand. But basic ideas of philosophy can be stated simply; philosophy can be brought into the marketplace, as old Socrates did. Come back for the next installment and find out for yourself. ■