

# Behold the Man

The Philosophy of Pope John Paul II



## Worthy of Respect

### The Personalist Norm

by John F. Crosby



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

Back when he was still Archbishop of Cracow, Pope John Paul II once wrote to his friend, the great theologian Henri de Lubac: "I devote my very rare free moments to a work that is close to my heart and is devoted to the metaphysical sense and mystery of the *person*. The evil of our times consists in the first place in a kind of degradation, indeed in a pulverization, of the fundamental uniqueness of each human person."

Here is the center of gravity of Pope John Paul II's mind and of his thought: the mystery of each human person. How shall we enter into his philosophical reflection on persons? Let's look into his moral philosophy, and in particular that part of it where he formulates the first principle of morality.

Moral philosophers have always sought out the most basic principles of the moral life. They have come up with principles such as "care for your soul," "provide for your full flourishing and well-being," "live according to nature," "give to everyone what is due to him," "fulfill the commands of God." But only in the last few centuries have moral philosophers expressed the first principles in distinctly personalist terms. The German philosopher Kant (1724-1804) led the way when he formulated the first principle of morality: "Persons should always be treated as their own ends and should never be merely used as an instrumental means." This principle installs respect for persons at the center of the moral

life, and it sees all using of persons as its principal violation.

Pope John Paul II is profoundly indebted to this new personalism in ethics. In his first book, *Love and Responsibility*, he writes: "This personalist norm, in its negative aspect, states that the person is the kind of good which does not admit of use and cannot be treated as an object of use and as the means to an end." Then he goes beyond Kant and adds: "In its positive form the personalist norm says that the person is a good toward which the only proper and adequate attitude is love."

This personalist norm provides us with a most helpful entry into the Pope's thought. For once we get acquainted with the norm, we are naturally led to ask what exactly it means to say that each person is his own end, and what it means to "use" others.

Pope John Paul II answers by teaching that each person possesses himself, or belongs to himself. Persons are not just *there*, like rocks or plants; they are handed over to themselves, they are their own. As a result, they can make different things of themselves, they can accept or reject themselves. Above all, they can determine themselves in freedom, indeed, in a certain sense, they can create themselves. If you try to use a person as a mere instrument, then you deprive that person of the space he needs for the uniquely personal work of self-creation. If we are really going to respect persons, then we must step back from them, take our heavy hands off them, and let them

be, that is, live as self-determining beings. In respecting them like this and in abstaining from all using, we treat persons as their own end.

Here we have the reason why it is wrong to own another human being as property, as is attempted in the institution of slavery. As person the other belongs to himself and so cannot belong to someone as property. Trying to own the other violates the other precisely as self-possessing person.

Religiously committed people are likely to balk at the idea that we belong to ourselves. They may say that we do not belong to ourselves but to God, and that we are not our own end but that God is our end, and that there is no indignity in being used as an instrument in God's hands ("Lord, make me an instrument of your peace"). In other words, they may find something downright impious about the central intuition of Pope John Paul II's personalism!

Let us ask what God thinks about our existing as our own ends, for He surely has the last word on what is impious and what is not. Pope John Paul II interprets the mind of God for us like this:

"Nobody can use a person as a means toward an end, no human being, nor yet God the Creator. On the part of God, indeed, it is totally out of the question, since, by giving man an intelligent and free nature, He has thereby ordained that each man alone will decide for himself the ends of his activity, and not be a blind tool of someone else's ends. Therefore, if God intends to direct man toward certain goals, He allows him, to begin with, to know those goals, so that he may make them his own and strive toward them independently."

He says "strive toward them independently," because once we understand the goals that God proposes to us, we can will these all on our own. He doesn't have to trick us or coerce us into moving toward those goals, as if we were mere instruments for His purposes. He deals with us as persons by enabling us to want them for ourselves just as much as He wants them for us. He treats us as partners in His work rather than as instruments for achieving it.

Human persons, then, commit no impiety by respecting each other as beings who belong to themselves and exist as their own ends, *for God shows us just this respect*. Indeed, Pope John Paul II says in another place that *we share in God's vision of us human beings when we respect each other as ends and abstain from all using of each other*.

We belong to God, not as the plants and animals belong to Him, but as human persons, who in some sense also belong to ourselves. We persons are able to consciously and freely enact our belonging to God by handing ourselves over to Him, and in this way we come to belong to God far more perfectly than any subpersonal creature; but we achieve this more perfect belonging *precisely on the basis of our belonging to ourselves*. As for the religious talk of gladly being an instrument in the hands of God, Pope John Paul II suggests that we should interpret this as the unconditional readiness to serve God, but he reminds us that such unconditional service must be offered in a manner appropriate to our being persons, which means that our service must not include the readiness to "be a blind tool of someone else's ends." God is the very last one who would ask for such a violation of the personhood that He Himself created.

The idea that God knows better than anyone else that we are our own ends and are never rightly used as mere means, was expressed at Vatican II. In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), which Archbishop Karol Wojtyla had a large hand in drafting, we find this sentence, which Pope John Paul II cannot quote often enough: Although man is "the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake," it is nevertheless true that man "can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself." I will return in a later installment to the second part of this sentence; for now I want to focus on the personalist affirmation that man is "the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake." God does not will the plants and animals for their own sakes. He rather wills

them for the sake of human persons. But human persons He wills for no one else's sake: He wills them for their own sake, which means that they must exist as their own ends.

One might object that it is impossible to live by the personalist norm. One might say that whenever an employer hires an employee for a job, he is using the employee as a means for getting the job done, but what reasonable person would say that you violate personal dignity by the very act of hiring someone to do a job? In other words, there must be something wrong with the personalist norm, since it seems to condemn as immoral the most normal economic relations.

To this Pope John Paul II responds that the relation between employer and employee is indeed fraught with the danger that the employee will be treated only as a means, and that when this happens the relation is indeed morally out of order. But he goes on to say that the relation need not be one of mere using. The employer can abstain from all coercion and intimidation in hiring people, he can abstain from deceptively enticing people to take a job, he can take account not only of "the bottom line" but of the good of the employees, he can even invite them to share somehow in the responsibility for the enterprise. In these and in other ways the employer-employee relation can be "personalized," so that the employee is acknowledged as person even in the midst of this economic relation.

Pope John Paul II brings the personalist norm into every area of human life, and so it is not surprising that he has brought it into his rich teaching on man and woman. We will see in later installments how fruitfully John Paul uses it to rethink the issues of sexual morality. He shows how the sexual behaviors traditionally regarded as wrong are wrong because persons get used in a degrading way. He shows that the requirements of chastity are nothing other than the requirements of the personalist norm as applied to man-woman relations. In this personalist way he achieves, as we shall see, a particularly convincing and winning affirmation of Christian sexual morality. ■