

***The Living Inheritance of John XXIII and John Paul II***  
***WITNESSES WHO MADE VISIBLE THE ESSENTIAL***

by Julián Carrón\*

We must go back to the situation of the Church in the 1950s to understand the historic importance of the two Popes who are being canonized today. A Church that risked remaining closed in on itself, with great difficulty in establishing a suitable relationship with modern thought, needed an epochal shift to return to announcing Christ in a convincing and attractive way to the people of our time.

“The merciful forbearance of God for the salvation of the human person,” with these words Fr. Giussani summarized the testimony of the good Pope who, in *Pacem in Terris*, had sensed that the “divorce” between faith and life in the baptized was the result of “an inadequate education in Christian teaching and Christian morality. It is essential, therefore, that the instruction given to our young people be complete and continuous” (n. 153).

Who could have imagined, only a short time before, an event like that of the Second Vatican Council? It required the simple personality of John XXIII to shoulder all the responsibility of convening an ecumenical council. Even if Paul VI was the one who guided the works of the assembly, the merit of convening it and establishing its first moves will always be Pope Roncalli’s. As Joseph Ratzinger observed way back in 1968, he “is one of the few who are truly great, who, overcoming all fixed frameworks, experience personally in a new and creative way that which is at the origin, the truth itself, and succeed in giving it new relevance.” It seems like reading one of Pope Francis’ many calls to return to the essential.

If the honor for convening the Council rests with John XXIII, credit for having made his own the Council’s mandate and Paul VI’s eagerness for its realization, undoubtedly has to be given to the other Pope being canonized, John Paul II. After the upheaval of the so-called post-Council years (Pope Montini spoke of the period as a “day of clouds, storms, darkness, searching, and uncertainty”), in which one clearly saw what no longer worked, but had yet to find what could truly respond to the challenges of the present, the arrival of John Paul II represented a breath of fresh air for a Church in difficulty.

Perhaps only today do we begin to realize the nature of the impact his election had on the life of the Church. He turned back “with the strength of a titan—a strength which came to him from God—a tide which appeared irreversible,” helping “believers throughout the world not to be afraid to be called Christian, to belong to the Church, to speak of the Gospel” (Benedict XVI, Homily at the Beatification of John Paul II, May 1, 2011). As Fr. Giussani said, Pope Wojtyła embodied “the clear

certainty of what the content of the Christian message means also for the history of this world, that is, faith in God made man, with the consequent enthusiasm for this Man, in whom it is possible to place all the hope of individuals and of the entire world”.

Who does not remember the impact of his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*? “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. [...] The man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly—and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial, and even illusory standards and measures of his being—he must with his unrest, uncertainty and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter into Him with all his own self, he must ‘appropriate’ and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find himself” (n. 10).

With his personal testimony of a Christianity lived with unique awareness and boldness, John Paul II brilliantly re-proposed the theological foundation of the Catholic faith in the Trinitarian encyclicals: Christ, center of the cosmos and of history (*Redemptor Hominis*); God the Father, rich in mercy (*Dives in Misericordia*); the Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life (*Dominum et Vivificantem*). At the same time, Pope Wojtyła also showed all the anthropological and cultural implications of the Christian faith for the life of the human person: reason, exalted and made healthy by faith (*Fides et Ratio*); morality, dependent on faith (*Veritatis Splendor*); the significance of faith for economics and work (his social encyclicals); the missionary nature of faith (*Redemptoris Missio*); the capacity of faith to illuminate the mystery of pain (*Salvifici Doloris*), of human life (*Evangelium Vitae*), and of the family (*Familiaris Consortio*). Thus men and women can understand the promise that the Christian faith brings along to respond to their yearning for fulfilment in all aspects of life.

In 2005, then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio paid homage to John Paul II, speaking of him as “a man who engages his whole person, and with his whole person and his whole life, with his transparency, corroborates what he preaches.” He was a witness who made visible the *essential*, that is, Jesus Christ, the One who saves the human and fills with gladness the “restless heart” of each person.

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