

John Paul II *Redemptor Hominis* (1979)

1. Context

1978: 'The year of three Popes'

Redemptor Hominis (Redeemer of Man), promulgated on the 4th March, 1979, was the first encyclical of John Paul II. The Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyla had been elected Pope John Paul II in October 1978, after the very brief pontificate of John Paul I (August-September 1978; Paul VI had been Pope from 1963-1978. John Paul II was the first non-Italian Pope since the early sixteenth century). Like John Paul I, John Paul II chose a name which combined the names of the two Popes of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), John XXIII and Paul VI, in order to emphasize that he was committed to the legacy of the Council, in which he had been an active participant.

Commitment to Vatican II

This commitment is very clear in *Redemptor Hominis*, in which John Paul II emphasizes the great achievement of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. At the Council, he had also been an important supporter of *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Freedom, arguing that the Church could not insist on its own freedom from Communist oppression unless it extended full religious freedom to non-Catholics in traditionally Catholic countries such as Spain and Portugal.

The 'cold war' context

Karol Wojtyla was born in 1920, had found his vocation to the priesthood during the Nazi occupation of Poland and been consecrated bishop during the post-war Stalinist dictatorship. He had been a professor of philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin and was Cardinal Archbishop of Krakow at the time of his election as Pope. When *Redemptor Hominis* was issued, global politics were still bound up with the 'Cold War', the tension between the Soviet Union and its satellite states and the United States of America and its allies. The Communist government of North Vietnam had conquered South Vietnam in 1975. Some parts of Portugal's former African empire had become Soviet-aligned. There was to be a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979. Although the end of the 'Cold War' was little more than a decade away, geopolitical tensions were high at the time when *Redemptor Hominis* was issued.

The call for human rights

The call for human rights was also gaining in strength at this time. The US President Jimmy Carter (in office 1976-80), a devout Baptist, sought to make respect for human rights an important criterion in the foreign policy of the United States. This resulted in tensions between the Carter administration and military dictatorships in Latin America, which had formerly enjoyed more American support. Liberation theology had been

gaining influence in Latin America throughout the 1970s, and John Paul's relationship to liberation theology was to be an important aspect of his pontificate in the 1980s.

First visit to Poland – the 'Solidarity' movement

A few months after issuing *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II made his first pontifical visit to Poland. Attracting huge crowds, he reminded his fellow Poles of the Christian roots of their culture, and affirmed them in their struggle for human rights. In the next year, 1980, the Solidarity movement began to challenge the dictatorship of the Communist Party, and John Paul II was to give it crucial advice and support in the following years of struggle until the end of Communism in Poland in 1989.

2. Executive Summary

Christ the centre of history

The central theme of *Redemptor Hominis* is the centrality of Jesus Christ in human history and as the answer to the human search for meaning and identity. Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* was a reflection on the situation of humanity in the mid-twentieth century that constantly returned to Christ as the true meaning of humanity, the one who reveals us to ourselves. *Redemptor Hominis* takes up this theme and develops it as the charter of John Paul II's pontificate.

The argument with Marxism-Leninism and other 'materialisms'

The encyclical was deeply influenced by the imposition of Marxist atheism on Poland. In a very important sense, it was a Christian answer to Marxism-Leninism, which had sought to weaken and eventually abolish the Catholic Church. Yet the encyclical does not see Marxism-Leninism as the only enemy of authentic humanity: it is critical of any form of power or set of attitudes that degrades the human person, including other forms of materialism, such as consumer capitalism.

Marx's theory of religious and economic alienation

As a professor of philosophy and church leader in the post-war period, Karol Wojtyla had had to resist Communist ideology and Communist power in many different contexts. At the same time, he was eager to debate with Marxist thinkers and to engage with the foundations of Marxist thought. For Marx, 'the root of man is man himself' (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1844): in this atheistic world-view, there is no purpose to human existence other than what human beings can shape for themselves through work and historical struggle. Marx had argued that human beings lose their humanity in a multi-dimensional process he called 'alienation'. In *religious alienation* (and here Marx drew heavily on the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach), humanity seeks hope and meaning in the false consolation of heaven: rather than realizing that only struggle in this world can liberate us from oppression, human beings become resigned to injustice by

transferring or ‘alienating’ all their hopes to the next world. (It is fair to note that the early nineteenth-century Christian response to industrialization gave Marx some evidence for this judgement.) In *economic alienation*, human beings become enslaved to their own products. Their work and ingenuity is transformed into ‘capital’, the accumulation of wealth, and this capital in turns rules them, making work into drudgery and bondage, rather than the spontaneous expression of the human capacity to transform nature.

John Paul II’s response to Karl Marx

Karol Wojtyla accepted some of Marx’s insights concerning economic alienation. He was critical of any economic system that deprived work of its human character, that made the products of work more important than the human person, the subject of work. At the same time, he rejected the utopian illusions of Marxism, the belief that the abolition of private ownership of the means of production would usher in a classless society of spontaneous work. In its Stalinist form, it had in fact become a totalitarian dictatorship. John Paul II’s reflections on the meaning of work as a dimension of our humanity were to be developed in his third encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Labour) (1981).

A foundation of *Redemptor Hominis* is the rejection of the Marxist idea of religious alienation. Whereas Marx had argued that ‘Communism is the solution to the riddle of history, and knows itself to be the solution’ (*Communist Manifesto*, 1848), *Redemptor Hominis* is inspired by the faith that Jesus Christ is at the centre of human history, and that faith in Jesus Christ is not alienating, but rather the true source of fulfilled and joyful human existence.

3. Key Points of the Document

Christ, the revealer of the mystery of humanity

Redemptor Hominis (RH) is a proclamation of Christ’s central role in human history as the redeemer of humanity. It affirms the highest values of modern humanism - religious freedom and social justice - and seeks to relate Christian proclamation to the universal human search for meaning – to the transcendent dimension of the human person. Its central message is that Christ is the answer to this search.

It affirms a key passage of *Gaudium et Spes*: ‘The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light’ (GS 22; RH 8). Drawing on this teaching of Vatican II, *Redemptor Hominis* proclaims Jesus Christ as the revelation of the meaning of our humanity, the divine manifest in the human. Our redemption takes place within human history, since Christ is present in that history and shares our human condition in all things but sin.

The Gospel of human dignity – humanity is the ‘way of the Church’

The revelation of the mystery of our humanity in Christ is a revelation of our preciousness, our extraordinary dignity. For *Redemptor Hominis*, this is the Gospel, the Good News, of Christianity. Christianity is therefore the ultimate basis of a true humanism, of an attitude of respect and care for every human being.

Since the Word of God is made flesh in our history, then the Church that proclaims Christ must be concerned above all with humanity – humanity is ‘the primary and fundamental way for the Church’ (RH 14), both in terms of the great issues of contemporary history and of the precious uniqueness of every human being. *Redemptor Hominis* constantly affirms the Church’s readiness to stand with human beings in their history, their particular social context, and aid and guide them in the search for that true humanity that has its source and fulfillment in Christ.

Reading the ‘signs of the times’

Redemptor Hominis follows the methodology of *Gaudium et Spes* by considering the significance of the ‘signs of the times’ (GS 4), that is, reflecting on key developments in contemporary history in the light of the Gospel. Here *Redemptor Hominis* focuses especially on our technological power and the movement for human rights. One of the ‘signs of the times’ for *Gaudium et Spes* was the inescapable ambivalence of human intelligence and creativity. Technological power can lead to human progress but also to nuclear war and environmental destruction. It can also widen rather than close the gap between the rich and poor. Because of this, there must be ‘a priority of ethics over technology’ (RH 16), so that our technological creativity is put to the service of human solidarity. In relation to human rights, the encyclical praises the ‘magnificent effort made to give life to the United Nations organization’ (RH 17) and emphasizes how closely the struggle for human rights is linked with the Church’s own mission. At the same time, the document soberly reviews the abuses of human rights in the contemporary world and names the hypocrisy of many governments in this regard.

Prayer and hope

Life in Christ is life led in hope for the resurrection, but this hope is not one that leads the Church to ignore or neglect our human situation in this world. Even in its hope for eternal life, the Church remains profoundly concerned with everything that affects human beings and their dignity in this life. It prays to the Holy Spirit from the midst of our history, because it is through prayer that we can overcome all forms of materialism and be open to the divine sources of our humanity.

4. Key Quotations from the Document

At the close of the second millennium....

THE REDEEMER OF MAN, Jesus Christ, is the centre of the universe and of history. To him go my thoughts and my heart in this solemn moment of the world that the Church and the whole family of present-day humanity are now living. (RH 1)

Christ, the revealer of the mystery of our humanity

In its penetrating analysis of "the modern world", the Second Vatican Council reached that most important point of the visible world that is man, by penetrating like Christ the depth of human consciousness and by making contact with the inward mystery of man, which in Biblical and non-Biblical language is expressed by the word "heart". Christ, the Redeemer of the world, is the one who penetrated in a unique unrepeatable way into the mystery of man and entered his "heart". Rightly therefore does the Second Vatican Council teach: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come (*Rom 5:14*), Christ the Lord. Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, *fully reveals man to himself* and brings to light his most high calling". (RH 8, quoting *Gaudium et Spes* 22)

Christ – divine love in a human heart

The redemption of the world - this tremendous mystery of love in which creation is renewed - is, at its deepest root, the fullness of justice in a human Heart - the Heart of the First-born Son - in order that it may become justice in the hearts of many human beings, predestined from eternity in the Firstborn Son to be children of God and called to grace, called to love. (RH 9)

The Gospel of human dignity

How precious must man be in the eyes of the Creator, if he "gained so great a Redeemer", and if God "gave his only Son" in order that man "should not perish but have eternal life". In reality, the name for that deep amazement at man's worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News. It is also called Christianity. This amazement determines the Church's mission in the world and, perhaps even more so, "in the modern world". This amazement, which is also a conviction and a certitude - at its deepest root it is the certainty of faith, but in a hidden and mysterious way it vivifies every aspect of authentic humanism - is closely connected with Christ. It also fixes Christ's place -so to speak, his particular right of citizenship- in the history of man and mankind. (RH 10)

Human transcendence: the restless search for God

The Fathers of the Church rightly saw in the various religions as it were so many reflections of the one truth, "seeds of the Word", attesting that, though the routes taken

may be different, there is but a single goal to which is directed the deepest aspiration of the human spirit as expressed in its quest for God and also in its quest, through its tending towards God, for the full dimension of its humanity, or in other words for the full meaning of human life. (RH 11)

Humanity is the 'way of the Church'

Man is the way for the Church -a way that, in a sense, is the basis of all the other ways that the Church must walk- because man - every man without any exception whatever - has been redeemed by Christ, and because with man - with each man without any exception whatever - Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it: "Christ, who died and was raised up for all, provides man"-each man and every man- "with the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme calling" (RH 14)

5. Reception

Since *Redemptor Hominis* was John Paul II's inaugural encyclical and in fact a charter for his pontificate, the reception of *Redemptor Hominis* is essentially a matter of the reception of the key emphases and concerns of his pontificate as a whole.

A Christological conception of human dignity

In theological terms, *Redemptor Hominis* put the bond between Christology and anthropology at the centre of the pontificate. The conviction that the mystery of the human person is revealed in Jesus Christ the redeemer became the foundation for John Paul's extraordinary dedication to the cause of humanity in a global context. As noted above, this was based in Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* and had also been a key concern of Paul VI, notably in the document *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Proclaimers of the Gospel) (1975).

Prior to Vatican II, the moral teaching of the Church, including its teaching about human dignity, had been expressed more in terms of the 'natural law', the perspective ultimately derived from classical philosophy which understood human dignity to be based in reason and freedom and to be evident to all people of 'right reason'. The last great expression of this approach in a Papal document was John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* of 1963. (This is not to deny that more contemporary interpretations of 'natural law' are still important and influential, nor that John Paul himself strongly endorsed them, especially in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*.) The intense commitment of John Paul II to this Christological understanding of human dignity, together with the length of his pontificate, has entrenched this perspective in official Church documents and in the life of the Church. It can be said to be part of the 'texture' of contemporary Catholicism.

The Church and human rights

Further, *Redemptor Hominis* and all it foreshadowed in John Paul's pontificate set the seal on the Church's support for human rights and democracy around the world.

Redemptor Hominis constantly affirms that the ‘human person is the way of the Church’ within the particular contexts of human history and historical struggle. During John Paul’s pontificate, there could be no doubt that the rights of human beings – their economic, political and social situation – were of great concern to the Church. The Church was clearly no longer simply ‘otherworldly’, if it had ever been – it was concerned with the fate of human beings in this world as it hoped for the fullness of the Kingdom in the next.

Controversies concerning the meaning of ‘the human’

Inevitably, the concern for humanity and for each human person expressed in *Redemptor Hominis* had to receive specific expression in terms of a variety of Papal stances on different moral and political questions. Within a global Church, involved at every level with varying understandings of human nature, purpose and fulfillment in different cultures and social groups, there could not fail to be much controversy about ‘the human’.

In the *socio-political* context, a key area of controversy was the tension between the Vatican and Latin American liberation theology during the 1980s. Deeply influenced by his own experience of Marxism-Leninism, John Paul was strongly critical of economic injustice and military dictatorships in Latin America but also of aspects of liberation theology which, he argued, borrowed concepts and approaches from Marxism that were incompatible with Christian faith. Liberation theologians tended to argue, in response, that the concepts they borrowed were useful tools of analysis that could be effectively detached from Marx’s atheism and determinism. John Paul’s condemnation of capital punishment and of virtually all Western military campaigns, from the 1990-1991 Gulf War onwards, was also highly controversial in many Western circles, as were his criticisms of consumer capitalism.

In terms of *personal life*, in Western countries in particular, the debate about ‘the human’ focused more on sexual ethics and gender issues. While John Paul expressed a very strong consensus in the Church in his stance against euthanasia and abortion, there was much more controversy over his firm reaffirmation of the intrinsic immorality of contraception and prohibition of debate over the question of the ordination of women in the Catholic Church.

6. Discussion Questions

1. When reflecting on the worth of the human person, when/why do you ground it in:

- Human reason and freedom
- Our creation in ‘the image of God’
- Our union with Christ, the ‘Redemptor Hominis’?

2. To what extent are your answers to question 1 dependent on the different situations you are in/audience you may have?

3. Read Part II of *Redemptor Hominis* 'The Mystery of the Redemption' (sections 7-12). How does John Paul express the meaning of the union of divine and human in Christ?
4. To what extent do you encounter the belief that religion 'alienates' us from the full potential of being human? Why do you think this belief has developed? How might it be answered in the light of *Redemptor Hominis*?
5. 'The human person is the way of the Church'. In what ways do you see the Catholic Church being engaged on behalf of humanity in our society? Where is there some room for improvement?
6. The Iranian Islamic revolution, led by the Ayatollah Khomeini, was developing in 1979 at the same time as the promulgation of *Redemptor Hominis*. To what extent did that revolution foreshadow a world situation different from the 'cold war'? Is this relevant to interpreting the message of *Redemptor Hominis* for today?
7. *Redemptor Hominis* called for 'a priority of ethics over technology'. In what areas of our lives is this a useful moral criterion? What would it mean specifically for one particular area of social or economic life?

7. Bibliography

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8. Weblinks

Redemptor Hominis

http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0218/_INDEX.HTM

Gaudium et Spes

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

John Paul's recollections of his own involvement in the preparation of *Gaudium et Spes*

http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01051997_p-28_en.html

Laborem Exercens (On Human Labour)

http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0217/_INDEX.HTM

Karl Marx's view of religion as alienation

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/df-jahrbucher/law-abs.htm>