

THE GIFT OF PARENTHOOD, ACCORDING TO JOHN PAUL II

I. LEARNING TO LOVE HUMAN LOVE.

The subject of *parenthood* engaged in a very important part of Saint John Paul II/Karol Wojtyła's (1920-2005) pastoral and intellectual writings. His thought is very unique in style, revealing two particular aspects of his personal life: first, his difficult childhood, lived under the custody of his widower father and Edmund, his older brother who was killed by a terrible disease when little Karol was twelve years of age. Undoubtedly, *Lolek's* -as they used to call him- character was forged by death and unimaginable suffering, a fact that contributed enormously to strengthen his moral education. A second aspect would be the importance of his juvenile environment (*Srodowisko*) where Karol, now ordained priest, wielded his ministry –later on as bishop and cardinal– in a time when Poland was being tormented by political changes, wars, and various campaigns in favour of sexual downgrade (stated as sexual freedom).

Such experiences among politicians, heroic figures of the Catholic Church and mostly youngsters showed the Polish priest to have a profound respect for human love. As he commented years later on several occasions, he literally *learned to love human love*. Truly, it was among youngsters where Wojtyła sat the grounds to build up a very broad philosophical and theological *rationale*, together with a solid academic, religious, and pastoral education. These grounds throw clear light illuminating human sexuality to its very depth in order to bring it to its full beauty.

It was at this stage where he also acquired the complementary experience that encouraged him to work on a manuscript in the early Sixties that would remain in the years to come as one of the most outstanding writings in the field of love and marriage: *Love and Responsibility*, a book inspired by a profound need among the group of friends and young couples he worked with. At the same time, the book is known for being the first outcome of a very solid intellectual reflection. All these experiences, closely related to family life lived by ordinary people, gave full-body to what we can call an “introductory” stage to what was coming in the late sixties. It is fair to say that Wojtyła's background among students, his experiences as pastor and as lecturer became

one of his most recognized abilities. A *charisma* that earned him being considered an authority on topics related to married life, sexuality and family. In fact, a few years after *Love and Responsibility's* first edition was published, he was called by Pope Paul VI to participate in the Pontifical Commission appointed by the Pope to investigate the moral grounds challenged by the new contraception technology. Alongside with his own Polish Commission, Wojtyla's investigations were in agreement with the Roman draft that embodied Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, the encyclical that changed the history of the modern Church forever. At the same time, Wojtyla remained ever humble and always close to his pastoral and academic commitments, as well as his hobbies and personal likings. Following *Love and Responsibility's* core message, he also wrote two theatrical and poetical master pieces: *Our God's Brother/Radiation of Fatherhood* and *The Jeweler's Shop*, a token of his dramatic inspiration towards human love.

The controversies around Pope Paul's new encyclical marked Wojtyla's future interest around sexual ethics. He took the dissentient moral opinions, by then shared by the masses, as an authentic challenge, a fact that can be confirmed in a series of papers and articles he wrote about of *Humanae Vitae's* doctrine. His intellectual agenda was strongly inspired by the Pontifical document from that moment on, even when the time came for him to be called to Saint Peter's Chair. It was at that moment when all these experiences matured in his analytical mind, giving birth to the one of the most promising theological works of his time: *The Theology of the Body*, an extended catechesis on human love seen through the prism of the Christian Revelation, written and taught by John Paul II himself, from Saint Peter Square, in the Wednesday general audiences.

II. THE QUEST FOR THE MEANING OF PARENTHOOD.

From this brief historical introduction, we can assume that Wojtyla was moved by a deep *pastoral interest* when he taught sexual morals to people through the glorious vision of human life and divine love. He had a gift to come near his friends, students, and parishioners and deliver his view on the intrinsic value of the human person and the gift of participating in the creation of human life. He understood conjugal love and family as a sign and symbol that conveys in the visible world the invisible mystery hidden in God from eternity.

All this can be easily recognized through his whole teaching as priest, bishop and pope and his intellectual evolution as poet, philosopher and theologian from the late 50's to the middle 80's. In these years, Wojtyla wrote a series essays and homilies that could be classified in the following *four periods* of his intellectual work.

The First Period

In this stage, stretching out from 1950 to 1958, Wojtyla published a series of articles in various Polish magazines such as *Znak*, *Tygodnik Powszechny* and *Ateneum Kaplanskie*. Some of them are: *Instinct, Love and Matrimony* (1952); *Reflexions over Marriage* (1957); *Propaedeutic of the Sacrament of Marriage* (1958). He addressed married love and sexuality, pointing out the difficult situation that most young couples experienced in Poland during that era. Wojtyla was concerned with the social, economic and ideological challenges that married couples confronted in Communist Poland.

The Second Period

Love and Responsibility is the key work here. Published in 1960, this book results from Wojtyla's interaction with young couples at the Catholic University of Lublin. In fact, he became Bishop at that time, and thought of presenting a vision of sexual ethics enlightening the struggles people suffered. This is how one of his greatest philosophical achievements came out, *the personalist norm*: a person is an entity of a sort to which the only proper and adequate way to relate is love. From this view, Wojtyla builds up his argument to explain love between man and woman, particularly when the time for marriage and opening themselves to a new life presents to them as a choice, a gift and a mystery with all its possibilities. This idea is the key point of the last chapter of the book, *Justice towards the Creator*, and perhaps the most enriching of the whole book.

The Third Period

This period is remarkable for the amount of documents dedicated to explaining and justifying the doctrine of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. As mentioned before, Paul VI's encyclical meant to be the Catholic response to the emerging problem of contraception in the 1960's. Wojtyla understood the general dissent towards *Humanae Vitae* and wrote several articles and homilies to further explain the argument of the Pope's teaching. Two articles are relevant to our purpose: *The Family as "Communio*

Personarum” (1974), and *Fruitful and Responsible Love* (1978). *Parenthood* is valued here as a great responsibility when giving life to children.

The Fourth Period

Finally, on the last period, Wojtyla – now as Pope John Paul II – brings all his knowledge and experience acquired over the years to *The Theology of the Body*. It started to be taught every Wednesday in the general audiences in Saint Peter’s Square, from 1979 to 1984, as an attempt to find a more theological justification to the doctrine implicit in *Humanae Vitae*. There are various ways to organize the audiences without losing their internal coherence. In fact, such order tends to change from the Spanish translation to the English translation. Nevertheless, it seems as if Wojtyla decided to explicitly go over the doctrine of *Humanae Vitae* until the very end of the catechesis. To my understanding, he meant to work first on an *adequate anthropology* that could provide a complete vision of the meaning of the human person through the Revelation. Only then it would be possible to uplift the deep mystery that love between man and woman reveals. *The call of the two to become one flesh* underlines the foundations of family life: true, total, faithful and fruitful love between man and woman. Every time they *become one flesh*, they open to the gift of new life to bare, nurture and love.

III. PARENTHOOD: RESPONSIBILITY FOR HUMAN LIFE

What can we draw out after going through this detailed *scenario* of Wojtyla’s writings on marriage and family? Let us further explain some conclusions exposed by Wojtyla on each stage of his intellectual life:

The Importance of Working on the Self-Character

How is it possible to be responsible for family life and children and be a proficient professional at the same time? Wojtyla acknowledged this question back in the fifties when he was teaching youngsters about love. *Self-mastery* became his answer, parents must *work together on their self-character*; both husbands-fathers and wives-mothers have to improve their own personal character and therefore their marriage. It is not a matter of repression or constraint, but the constant aim towards becoming a loving couple. Thus, it is easier to set priorities in the matters of education, economic decisions, working hours and future plans for the family. It seems that Wojtyla understands work as an efficient way to be *responsible for the other person*; as

a way of giving oneself entirely to the loved ones: the husband-father to the wife-mother and vice versa, and together to the children.

Answering to the Vocation of Parenthood

Within the realm of marriage, man and woman become sexually intertwined, which opens the possibility of becoming parents; this should be freely and responsibly accepted as part of their vocation to marriage. *Young couples must freely acknowledge the possibility of becoming parents every time they give themselves in the sexual act.* This is why this potentiality is part of the *vocation* to marriage. Because parenthood, according to Wojtyla, *is a vocation* to the total, faithful, truthful and fruitful gift man and woman make of each other through marriage; expressed in the conjugal openness to bare new life.

Responsibility for the Life of Children

By relaying on his previous works, mostly *Love and Responsibility*, we can observe a clear development in his explanation on human love, whenever he was referring to the concept of parenthood. Wojtyla makes an emphasis on the responsibility man and woman assume for the child that might come to life as a result of their love expressed through their bodies. He calls for safeguarding such a love according to the *personal norm*. Family is understood as the gift of life and its realization in the love that procreates and nurtures the human person.

Setting the Foundations of Family Life

John Paul II explained in his *Theology of the Body* the anthropological foundations of Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* according to Scripture, mostly *Genesis*. He went back to *the beginning* in order to find a deeper meaning of human love in light of the divine plan, where *parenthood* is understood as the gift of participating in God's creation of new life. *Theology of the Body* became a *legacy for men and women* to understand and contemplate the great mystery revealed through our sexuality and *the call to become one flesh*. Marriage and family in the contemporary society is in constant attack from a poor, limiting and unsatisfying understanding of the true meaning of sexual life and conjugal love. To my understanding, John Paul II addresses the problem of *parenthood* pointing out the beauty of bearing new life in a truthful, faithful, free and total love frame. Because every human life hungers for this kind of love to be the reason

of his or her being. It is the kind of love that cares and nurtures human life according to the dignity of the human person.

III. WOJTYLA'S THEATRICAL WORKS

John Paul II returned to "House of the Father" in 2005, a year that was marked by a certain "hunger" for bringing the Polish Pope's life to the big screens. Three remarkable TV biographic miniseries saw the light that same year and the next: *Karol: The Man Who Became Pope* and *Karol: The Pope, The Man* both interpreted by the Polish actor Piotr Adamczyk as Wojtyla and John Paul II; *Pope John Paul II* starring Oscar winning John Voight as John Paul II at age of 84; and finally *Have no Fear: The Life of John Paul II* starting Thomas Kretschmann as John Paul II in the years between 2000 and 2005.

But those TV-short movies and several other documentaries filmed long before his death were not the only cinematographic products that can be found related to the life of the first Polish Pope who changed the history of the Church in Modern times. The splendor of Wojtyla's profound vision of marriage and family life was also beautifully expressed in some of his literary works as well, two of them in particular: *The Jeweler's Shop* and *Our God's Brother*.

The Jeweler's Shop was written in 1960. The story exalts the importance of the *wedding ring* as a true symbol of the love both husband and wife share through the gift of oneself to each other in the sacrament of marriage. The ring represents the living proof of man and woman's true vocation to love and to remain strong in front of any difficulties within the marriage itself or any cultural crisis (such as a World War I and II). As a play, *The Jeweler's Shop* turned to a full-scale film in 1988, starting *Burt Lancaster*, *Daniel Olbrychski* and *Olivia Hussey*. The film is mostly remembered as a "decent" movie of moral and artistic value, appropriate for a broad public including youngsters. It is one of those movies couples should consider watching before committing themselves to marriage. In the end, I think that's was Wojtyla's original intention in writing it.

Another text of the same nature, *Our God's Brother* and *Radiation of Fatherhood* leads the audience towards the life of Adam Hilary Bernard Chmielowski

(later Saint Albert Chmielowski), his loneliness and his encounter with fatherhood. Underlining the call of every man to their deepest hunger for experiencing the Love that truly satisfies: opening to the love of the Father as children in the image of the Son, in order to experience the gift as father of a new human life in the image of the Father. The first part, *Our God's Brother* also became a film directed by the Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Zanussi, who will remain close to John Paul II in the years to come.

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What is the meaning of *parenthood* to Saint John Paul II/Karol Wojtyła? From these four stages of his intellectual life, as well as his literary works, we can take notice of Wojtyła's constant reference to the intrinsic *value of the human person*; a being who is called to love and being loved; to be respected and to be responsible of his actions, most especially when it comes to the point of bringing other people to existence, which is the time when the meaning of *parenthood* is revealed:

“Parenthood is a gift that comes to man and woman together with love, that creates a perspective of love in the dimension of reciprocal life-long self-giving, and that is the condition of gradual realization of that perspective through life and action”

(Wojtyła, 1979)

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