

Idea and aim

The year 2025 marks the 20th anniversary of the death of John Paul II. We will simultaneously celebrate the 30th anniversary of the publication of his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, defending human life, and approach the 35th anniversary of the publication of his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, analyzing the collapse of the Communist Bloc, the essence and challenges of a modern democratic state and a free economy. John Paul II's thinking on social and political issues started from theology. He recognized that while there are secular activities, in the sense of not being under the jurisdiction of the Church, there are no completely secular areas in the sense of absolute independence from theological presuppositions (Rowland 2003, 79).

Over last two decades, our civilization is moving in the opposite direction. Social, economic and political projects as well as key categories of the Western legal order (e.g., human rights), pretend to be so secular and independent of any theological presumptions that they acquire even sacral qualities. This paradox of sacralization a rebours was described theoretically years ago by Leszek Kolakowski (2014).

Political choices perceived as “infallible decisions of the gods,” the accompanying stigmatization of the opposition, e.g. by assigning their statements to the category of hate speech, and preventive censorship in the media, including social media, make any rational political debate impossible. Maybe in this context it is particularly legitimate to refer to the legacy of John Paul II's thought.

On the one hand, there is a question of what went wrong. Why - contrary to the Pope's expectations - have the "tears of [the twentieth] century" not "prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit" (John Paul II 1995)? Why, in such a short time after the collapse of the totalitarian “culture of death,” did we choose a “new culture of death,” justifying this choice by appealing to democratic principles? Why are the leaders in promoting anti-culture Europe and its political institutions, as well as political parties formally referring to the idea of Christian democracy? Why did Poland, the Pope's homeland, become the terrain of this cruel experiment?

Such questions could be multiplied. It seems that at the root of these problems we have a return to the political monism that took place during the period of absolutism and the Enlightenment. The modern state ascribed to itself absolute competence, i.e. it also became a “secular” church, responsible to produce state morality. This model was not only consciously implemented in the French and Bolshevik revolutions but is also - albeit in a different way - an integral part of political liberalism (Alasdair MacIntyre, John Gray).

Criticism of the new “Western” authoritarianism is present in the texts of John Paul II in the last years of his life (vide: the dispute over so-called reproductive rights in Beijing and Cairo, the dispute over the preamble of the EU Constitutional Treaty). Of course, no less important is the question of what makes the opposition to these tendencies still somewhat successful in some Western countries (vide the decisions of constitutional courts in the US and Poland regarding guarantees of the right to life)?

On the other hand, it is a question about the accuracy of the papal analysis. For maybe some of the assumptions were wrong. Maybe "authentic democracy" is a utopian dream? Maybe the Pope was simply wrong, for example, in supporting the process of European integration. Maybe the hope for a "free economy" version of capitalism (CA) ultimately boils down to supporting an "economy that kills" (EG). Maybe hope is then to be placed in a "new paradigm of Catholicism," breaking with John Paul II's interpretation of moral theology and social teaching.

Or perhaps John Paul II's social theory works and works all too well? Ultimately, the course of evolution of democratic politics developed "as if there were no God" is proceeding, almost without deviation, along the trajectory outlined by St. John Paul II: the foundations of benevolent politics are being systematically and consistently undermined in most European countries and the EU itself. It can be said that just as real socialism was "in a way a concrete and institutional realization of Leo XIII's predictions" [CA 12], the state of contemporary politics is becoming an increasingly tangible realization of John Paul II's warnings against politics based on relativism. Europe, in its EU form, with increasing secularization, is making a political and anthropological choice in which the understanding of "the dignity of the person as fully revealed by the mystery of the Incarnate Word" becomes not only incomprehensible but also contradictory to European values [!]. Perhaps what has been insufficiently fulfilled are the hopes that the Holy Pontiff placed in the faithful, in the shepherds of the Church and people of goodwill calling them to go through and, after overthrowing communism, overthrow the flawed paradigm of Western politics as well?

We invite you to reflect together on these and other subjects, ultimately related to the issue of the relevance of the "question of God" to the possibility of a politics and economy benevolent to man. Sister Prof. Helen Alford OP and Prof. George Weigel, keynote speakers at the upcoming conference, have agreed to provide special assistance in this search.