



## LECTURES & PAPERS

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### *John Paul II and the Challenge of Evil in the World*

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Some might call him prescient. Over twenty years ago, Pope John Paul II penned his second encyclical, on “God the Father, Rich in Mercy,” in which he states:

Believing in the crucified Son means “seeing the Father,” means believing that love is present in the world and that this love is more powerful than any kind of evil in which individuals, humanity, or the world are involved. Believing in this love means believing in mercy. For mercy is an indispensable dimension of love; it is as it were love’s second name and, at the same time, the specific manner in which love is revealed and effected vis-a-vis the reality of the evil that is in the world, affecting and besieging man, insinuating itself even into his heart and capable of causing him to “perish in Gehenna ... .”<sup>1</sup>

Surely he could not have had in mind the manifestation of evil that erupted last September 11<sup>th</sup>. Yet the reality of evil, and its dehumanizing power, are central aspects of his thought and teaching, then as now.

Most are aware of Karol Wojtyla’s personal background. Suffice it to say, as does his biographer George Weigel, that he “has an intimate familiarity with suffering.” His formative years are shaped, in no small part, by brutality at the hands of Nazi and Communist regimes, including seeing his professors sent to concentration camps, being orphaned in an occupied country, having his friends murdered, and being run over by a German army truck and left unconscious in a ditch.<sup>2</sup> Given this experience, his wondering about the problem of evil in the world is hardly surprising. And so he asks what has become a persistent question, one that troubles him in both mind and heart: “*how do we restore the moral and social order subjected to such horrific violence?*”<sup>3</sup>

By way of a prelude to this restoration, the pope first grapples with the meaning of evil and the challenge it presents to human existence. Bringing his phenomenological thought to bear on this age-old subject, he has begun to create a systematic study of the problem, one which serves as a rich source of theological reflection. His words, spoken and written, offer a comprehensive approach to dealing with this profound mystery. This approach comes to light through a wide variety of papal teachings: in official correspondence, in friendly talks at the weekly angelus or general audience, in longer messages such as homilies and texts for special occasions, in formally delivered speeches, and ultimately in public prayer. Traditionally these texts would be considered “informal” papal teaching, yet taken together they do reveal the probing mind, concerned heart, and spiritual soul of the world’s most recognizable teacher. And, though the words are most likely written by someone else, when he speaks them aloud John Paul II makes them his own, and thereby proclaims to all the world the thought that undergirds them.

With his thought-provoking words on the subject, Pope John Paul II creates a theological triptych, the three panels being his reaction, his rhetoric, and his response to the signs of evil in our time. Through this teaching we can glimpse the intellectual artistry that informs the pope’s pastoral solicitude. Admittedly, his thought is profound, as is his writing vast. Moreover, the subject continues to draw attention from the pope, which necessitates that this analysis be provisional.

Nevertheless, the pope’s teaching to-date gives us sufficient material to consider. For the sake of brevity, this article is limited to a consideration of relevant writings which have been published since September 11<sup>th</sup>. Based on these papal texts, it then concludes with some particular reflections on how the structure of the pope’s teaching provides educators with a threefold means of responding to the challenge of evil in the world.

## **Papal REACTION to Evil in the World**

The opening panel of the pope’s theological triptych consists of his emotive reactions to the events of 9/11. On the face of it, his description of what happened is shared by the majority of social commentators. Like many, he refers to the events of that fateful day as a “tragic attack” undertaken by terrorists. Initially, this tragedy “seriously harmed the beloved American people.”<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, it “has disturbed the conscience of the entire world.”<sup>5</sup>

By characterizing those deeds in terms of tragedy, the pope, like most people, seems to be focusing on the inexplicable nature of what took place. In the immediacy of this world view, it is not surprising that he experiences “unspeakable horror,” from which can follow only a sense of “profound sorrow” at the enormity of suffering that so many people underwent.<sup>6</sup>

Yet John Paul II does not stop there. In his New Year’s Day message, he judges the September attack to be a “terrible crime” not only against those who perished but against humanity itself. Spurning any diplomatic deference, the pope describes the “terrible killings” on that day as a “slaughter” of innocents.<sup>7</sup>

Admittedly horrific to any person of good will, carnage of this sort extends even beyond the realm of what we call violence. In this pope’s view, the brutality of those acts discloses a “savage

cruelty” on the part of the perpetrators. Consequently, it rightly calls forth his “indignant condemnation.”<sup>8</sup>

Why do the pope’s reactions hold no hesitation, his words bear no reservation? It is because he sees this tragedy for something much deeper than what it appears to be. In a claim quite startling, even shocking considering its source, the pope ultimately denounces the terrorist attack as a truly “inhuman” act.<sup>9</sup>

What generates the unusual effusion on the part of the pope is his understanding of the extent of the terrorists’ actions. Terrible in and of themselves, these attacks are even more so an “affront” to both God and man, one which “dishonors” both the divine holiness and all human dignity.<sup>10</sup> Considered in this way, the bombs that day were not directed against merely geographical targets or even political entities. They contributed to an attack on our very existence as beings in the world. In this existential assault is evil manifest.

### **Papal RHETORIC concerning Evil in the World**

Seeing evil for what it is has never been an easy task. To aid our discernment, the pope adopts a universally recognizable metaphor and paints a picture of evil as darkness. For him September 11<sup>th</sup> is a “dark day in this history of humanity.”<sup>11</sup> In the days that have followed, evil has appeared as “dark clouds” gathering on the horizon of the world.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, the people of the world are faced with the task of “fending off the dark clouds of terrorism, hatred, (and) armed conflict, which ... have grown particularly ominous on humanity’s horizon.”<sup>13</sup> Under these clouds, he says, human beings now walk amid a “shadow”<sup>14</sup> by which are hidden those insidious forces of darkness that remain a continuous threat to our lives.

The pope’s deliberate association of darkness with the drama of human life suggests that what lies at the core of evil is a perverse attempt to reverse the divine act of creation itself. Where once the Creator proclaimed “let there be light” (Gen 1:3), acts of evil threaten to consign our world to its primordial condition, devoid of God and man. When this happens, we suffer an existential misery running much deeper than the bomb craters that have caused so much physical and emotional suffering. Endangered by such a dramatic threat, indignant outrage makes complete sense, even – or especially – for someone of the pope’s stature.

But that outrage is not purely and simply an emotional outburst. Rather, it reflects a deeper realization that the roots of evil, as with good, lie in the human heart. What the pope teaches, repeatedly, is that at the source of who we are as persons a dual potentiality exists: “Peace or violence spring up in the *human heart* over which God alone has power.”<sup>15</sup> When that divine power is ignored, when a human being seeks instead to be his own master through the imposition of his own will to power, the potential for violence is actualized in evil deeds.

Those deeds, however, are not the primary focus of the papal analysis. Instead, it is the interior dimension to which John Paul constantly returns when considering how and why evil is at work in the world. Faced with the facts of 9/11, the pope confesses that “(t)he human heart has

depths from which schemes of unheard of ferocity sometimes emerge, capable of destroying in a moment the normal daily life of a people.”<sup>16</sup>

Deep down, in the core of who we are, whether consciously or not, humans make a fundamental choice – for life or for death. Though the choice seems obvious, it is no longer surprising to learn that some choose death. But why? John Paul II suggests an answer in his annual message celebrating the World Day of Peace, wherein he offers a phenomenology of terrorism.<sup>17</sup> To begin, those who choose death are dwelling in despair – “of humanity, of life, of the future.” From this they build their own existence on a contempt for human life. And from this contempt they generate a “fanatic fundamentalism” on the basis of which they desire to inflict their existential choice wantonly on others. The end result is that terrorism “not only ... commit(s) intolerable crimes, but because it resorts to terror as a political and military means it is itself a true crime against humanity.”

The evil that springs from the human heart and takes shape in acts of terrorism should not, however, be relegated to the misguided judgments of the evil-doers alone. In terms of the social dimension to human life, the reality of evil can also be linked to large-scale injustices that plague the daily existence of so many. In his annual *Urbi et Orbi* address, as elsewhere, the pope laments those structural sins, old and new, that create so much human suffering:

Day after day, I bear in my heart  
the tragic problems of the Holy Land;  
every day I think with anxiety  
of all those who are dying of cold and hunger;  
every day there reaches me the desperate cry  
of those who, in so many parts of the world,  
call for a fairer distribution of resources  
and for gainful employment for all.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the darkness of evil, though manifest dramatically on 9/11, cannot be limited to a single day's events. Its dread reaches farther. Its dire consequences touch us all.

That the reality of evil concerns the human heart can also be discerned in the aftermath of the September events. In the new context of “tragic circumstances ... darkening the world scene,”<sup>19</sup> Pope John Paul II directs us to see that this contemporary manifestation of evil has “undermined its (humanity's) confidence”<sup>20</sup> and led to a radical change of perspective. Because we are no longer able to escape threatening situations, he says, our human hearts have become “anxious and distressed.”<sup>21</sup> We live now in a “climate of widespread anxiety.”<sup>22</sup> We are faced with “persistent flashpoints of cruel conflict”<sup>23</sup> that can overwhelm us in “new and disconcerting” ways.<sup>24</sup> As a result, we feel especially vulnerable. Then, when fear comes to dominate daily life, people tend to close themselves off from one another in a climate of mistrust,<sup>25</sup> thereby increasing their temptation to despair.<sup>26</sup> And thus begins to turn the vicious circle of hatred, attack, recrimination, and reprisal.

Based on his anthropological analysis, of both individuals and society, Pope John Paul II's treatment of evil in the world turns logically to a consideration of the role that religion plays in all of this. With ardent clarity, he first denounces any supposed ascription of religious belief to the

motivation of the evil-doers: “we declare that whoever uses religion to foment violence contradicts religion’s deepest and truest inspiration. ... There is no religious goal which can possibly justify the use of violence by man against man.”<sup>27</sup> Specifically, he discounts any reliance on social injustice as a reason for war and discredits the “terrorist claim to be acting on behalf of the poor” as “a patent falsehood.”<sup>28</sup>

In the pope’s view, any recourse to religion as a motivational factor for the grave evil of deliberately murdering innocent people “profane(s) the name of God and disfigure(s) the true image of man.” For this reason, he affirms the truth of religious beliefs, including those of “authentic Islam: the Islam that prays, that is concerned for those in need.”<sup>29</sup> And based on this affirmation, the pope renews his call for all believers to realize religion’s inherent vocation to unity and peace.<sup>30</sup>

This religious vocation is especially apparent in the truth-claims of Christianity. As the pope reminds the world, religious faith provides “a source of renewed hope and the impetus for an ever more determined resolve to reject the ways of hatred and violence.”<sup>31</sup> Based on the truth of Jesus, as the pope proclaims in his Christmas homily, the Christian faith says to all people of all time

... our trust in the redemptive power of the Word made flesh is confirmed. When darkness and evil seem to prevail, Christ tells us once more: Fear not! *By his coming into the world he has vanquished the power of evil, freed us from the slavery of death and brought us back to the banquet of life.*<sup>32</sup>

In sum, because of the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery, “evil, the *mysterium iniquitatis*, does not have the final word in human affairs.”<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the Christian message offers a salutary response to the realities that threaten our human situation.<sup>34</sup> In fact, “genuine religious belief is an inexhaustible wellspring of mutual respect and harmony among peoples; indeed it is the chief antidote to violence and conflict.”<sup>35</sup> This it does by providing hope. Inculcated through the Church’s spiritual activity, and proclaimed in its constant message of evangelization, this virtue is the building block to a more peaceful future. As the pope announces on New Year’s Day:

This is the hope which sustains the Church at the beginning of 2002: that, by the grace of God, a world in which the power of evil seems once again to have taken the upper hand will in fact be transformed into a world in which the noblest aspirations of the human heart will triumph, a world in which true peace will prevail.<sup>36</sup>

How this hope-filled transformation will take place is the final component of the pope’s theology concerning evil in the world.

## **Papal RESPONSE to Evil in the World**

Acknowledging that humanity “is *always* in need of peace,”<sup>37</sup> John Paul II includes prayer as the third panel in his theological triptych. Admittedly, this seems a likely response, coming as it

does from a world-wide religious leader; and the pope's own prayers give witness to this dimension of faith. But there is more here than just good example and religious leadership. For one thing, prayer has a primacy of place in the pope's overall response to the problem of evil because it is a valuable means by which humans strengthen their resolve for good. Even more so, the pope's exhortation that people of all religious persuasions turn to prayer reflects his theological conviction that spiritual activity is a truly necessary response to the challenges that now threaten human existence: "Only if we join forces and raise continuous prayer to the Most High will we obtain the gift of peace."<sup>38</sup>

The pope's own prayers enable him to render that "heartbroken and heartfelt consideration"<sup>39</sup> befitting the world's shepherd of souls. As people everywhere have done, John Paul intercedes with God for a variety of human needs: for mercy upon the victims, for consolation and peace to the survivors, for strength and courage to aid workers, for guidance to world leaders, for preservation from the scourge of terrorism, and for wisdom and peaceful intentions in the hearts of all people.<sup>40</sup> In this way, the pope effects a "participation in grief" that displays his own and the Church's solicitude for all humankind.<sup>41</sup>

However, the act of praying on the part of the pope and his call for prayer on the part of all is not simply a typical response, not merely a plea spoken in times of tragedy when one knows not what else to do. Rather, prayer constitutes the proper recourse to a higher power that, in the pope's view, is necessary when dealing with the challenge that evil presents to the world. Praying for peace, in this sense, is not an afterthought to the enigma that evil is.<sup>42</sup> Nor is it an attempt "to escape from history and the problems which it presents" in some search for a utopian ideal.<sup>43</sup>

Pope John Paul's urgent call for an intensification of prayer,<sup>44</sup> his exhortation to "mobilize" spiritual power,<sup>45</sup> issues instead from two convictions, one theological and one anthropological. Regarding the former, he understands true peace to be a gift from God, one that is "to be implored ... with fervent and trusting insistence."<sup>46</sup> In this sense, to pray "is of the very essence of building the peace of order, justice, and freedom. To pray for peace is to open the human heart to the inroads of God's power to renew all things."<sup>47</sup> This openness to divine power reflects an intentional commitment on our part by which we

choose to face reality not on our own, but with the strength that comes from on high, the strength of truth and love which have their ultimate source in God. Faced with the treachery of evil, religious people can count on God, who absolutely wills what is good.<sup>48</sup>

Regarding his anthropological conviction, the pope considers praying for peace to be a reflection of "the deepest sentiment of every human being." It discloses the truth that "God himself has placed in the human heart an instinctive tendency to live in peace and harmony." It fulfills an innate human desire that "is more deeply-rooted and determined than any impulse to violence."<sup>49</sup> In this way, prayer undertaken with fellow human beings acts as a light, whose supernatural beam "serves to scatter the shadows of suspicion and misunderstanding" and thereby to dissipate the darkness of evil in the world.<sup>50</sup>

Through prayer, then, we can combat the dark forces of evil that dwell, in potential, within the human heart. There, praying can give us courage against the temptation to despair.<sup>51</sup> There, praying can “awaken ... a firm resolve to reject the ways of violence, to combat everything that sows hatred and division within the human family, and to work for the dawn of a new era of international cooperation inspired by the highest ideals of solidarity, justice and peace.”<sup>52</sup> In this way, the spiritual activity of prayer ultimately contributes to a renewed “climate of faith and fraternity” by which society can restore its confidence in people, in a world that will once again know how to live amid relationships of openness to others and solidarity with all.<sup>53</sup>

Prayer, then, constitutes an essential part of the pope’s overall response to the challenge of evil. Owing to his analysis that evil is rooted in the human heart, and based on his hope-filled belief in the saving power of God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, the pope’s exhortation to prayer witnesses to his own vision of the possibility of a “*far-reaching resurgence of the human spirit in individual hearts and in relations between the peoples of the world.*”<sup>54</sup> Through prayer – not only but not without – we are able to forge peace in our lives. And this we must do, according to the pope, so that we can “save the children, in order to save the hope of humanity.”<sup>55</sup> Reflecting this insight, and in some way giving a summary of his threefold treatment of evil, Pope John Paul II offered the following prayer at the Synod of Bishops:

O God, Almighty and Merciful,  
he who sows discord cannot understand you,  
he who loves violence cannot welcome you:  
watch over us in our painful human condition  
tried by the brutal acts of terrorism and death;  
Comfort your children and open our hearts to hope.  
that our time may again know days of serenity and peace.<sup>56</sup>

## **Educational Reflections**

Pope John Paul II’s insightful analysis offers a comprehensive approach with which to enable people to come to grips, in some way, with the problem of evil. To apply this to the work of education, permit me to make reference to a university seminar which I regularly teach – called “The World of Evil.” The course begins and ends with the same three questions: (1) what is evil? (2) whence comes evil? and (3) what, if anything, can we do about evil? Gazing again upon the theological triptych created by the pope, the three panels of reaction, rhetoric, and response may offer us a more helpful way of dealing with these key questions.

First, the papal reaction to the tragic events of 9/11 suggests that educators should acknowledge their students’ need to vent. More than just emotional ranting, the horrified reactions of young people, heretofore safe from the ravages of war, are both natural and necessary. Running the gamut from extreme sorrow to patriotic outrage, human reactions to evil reflect the perilous power that aggrieves us, while at the same time disclosing our instinctual need to confront it with the power of goodness. But the pope’s reaction, especially as it extends to claiming terrorist killing to be “inhuman,” also suggests that we cannot stop at the mere release of emotion. Rather, education

must go beyond the affective and delve into the quagmire of trying to understand and explain the force of evil as a real, though ultimately limited, power. And this brings us to the second question.

The pope's rhetoric about evil, his analysis of its root causes and its social manifestations, suggests that educators today must situate the "whence" of evil within the human situation rather than in some outside agency. Talk of the "devil" and interest in the "demonic" may be legendary lore that makes for popular entertainment; but associating evil primarily with an external force can too easily lead students astray from taking responsibility for themselves and their social surroundings. The temptation to despair is a siren's voice in each one's soul. The tendency to hate is a lesson learned through faulty mind-sets. Teaching the next generation to choose life, to choose the sovereignty of God over mastery by one's self, is the challenge that we face and the task that we must undertake on behalf of all.

To succeed at this challenging task, and thus to do something about evil in the world, educators need also to include spiritual activity as a necessary element in any worthwhile response to the problem of evil. The pope's insistence on prayer as essential to the theology of good and evil suggests that educators must work against the current of contemporary society, which seeks to compartmentalize and privatize religious belief. Reacting to evil may provide a needed emotional outlet. Rational investigation of the cause and effect of evil may provide a beneficial intellectual exercise. But without prayer, without recourse to the higher power of the divine, without humble acknowledgment of our own inability to eradicate evil and confession of God's salvific act that has begun to do so, we are left with a mystery that will continue to confound us and to cause that profound anxiety which makes life even more difficult than it is.

In sum, the teaching of Pope John Paul II offers us a three-part strategy for facing the challenges of life in the world today. By reacting as our hearts are wont to do, by reasoning as our minds know they ought to do, and by responding in prayer as only our restless souls can do – this is the papal way for educating the world about the mystery we call evil ... and about the God who redeems us from it.

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## NOTES

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1. *Dives in Misericordia*, 11/30/80, #7.
  2. G. Weigel, *The Truth of Catholicism: Ten Controversies Explored* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 2001), 115.
  3. Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1/1/02, #2.
  4. General Audience, 9/16/01, #3.
  5. Discourse to the Directors and Staff of the Italian Security Force assigned to the Vatican, 1/17/02, #2.
  6. General Audience, 9/12/01.

7. Message for the World Day of Peace, 1/1/02, #1.
8. General Audience, 9/12/01.
9. General Audience, 9/12/01, and Address to the New Ambassador of the United States of America to the Holy See, 9/13/01; cf. the Holy Father's monition at the Synod of Bishops, 10/11/01, which refers to the "inhumane terrorist attacks."
10. General Audience, 9/12/01; Angelus, 10/21/01, #1; Address to the Members of the Curia, of the Pontifical Household and of the Vicariate of Rome, 12/22/01, #6; Message for the World Day of Peace 1/1/01, #6.
11. General Audience, 9/12/01; cf. his Address to the Members of the Curia, 12/22/01, #6.
12. Prayer on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 12/8/01, #3; cf. Urbi et Orbi message, Christmas 2001, #1, which specifically mentions the "dark clouds of violence and war."
13. Address to the Representatives of the World Religions, Assisi 1/24/02, #1.
14. Message for the World Day of Peace, 1/1/01, #1; cf. Address to the Members of the Curia, 12/22/01, #6.
15. Angelus 12/9/01, #2.
16. Angelus 9/12/01.
17. Message for the World Day of Peace, #4.
18. Urbi et Orbi message, Christmas 2001, #5. In his angelus talk on 11/11/01, the pope speaks specifically of the suffering of the people of Afghanistan (#2) and of the ecological problems the world faces (#3). In his address to the Catholic Bishops of the Holy Land, 12/13/01, the pope notes how people there "seem to be crushed by the weight of two different extremisms that ... are disfiguring the face of the Holy Land." Also, at the 56<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly of the United Nations on Disarmament, 10/15/01, the pope's representative comments on various "elements that spawn the conditions for hatred and violence."
19. Letter to Cardinal Walter Kasper, 9/15/01.
20. Address to the Representatives of the World Religions, Assisi 1/24/02, #3.
21. Homily, 12/24/01, #3.
22. Homily, 1/1/02, #2.
23. Address to the Representatives of the World Religions, Assisi 1/24/02, #3.
24. Prayer on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, 12/8/01, #3.
25. Discourse to the Italian Security Force, 1/17/02, #2.
26. Homily, 1/1/02, #2.
27. Address to the Representatives of the World Religions, Assisi 1/24/02, #4; cf. Angelus, 9/23/01, and Address to the Members of the Curia, 12/22/01, #6.

28. Message for the World Day of Peace #5.
29. Address at Meeting with Representatives of the World of Culture, Kazakhstan 9/24/01, #5; cf. Message for the World Day of Peace, #5.
30. Angelus, 9/30/01.
31. Letter to Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, 9/15/01.
32. Homily, 12/24/01, #3.
33. Message for the World Day of Peace, #1.
34. Angelus 10/21
35. Message for the World Day of Peace, #14.
36. Message for the World Day of Peace, #1.
37. Address to the Representatives of the World Religions, Assisi 1/24/02, #3.
38. Letter to Cardinal Kasper, 12/17/01.
39. Angelus, 9/16/01, #3.
40. In a somewhat unusual move, the Holy Father concluded the audience of 9/12/01 with a complete prayer of the faithful. He also offered a formal prayer for these needs at the Synod of Bishops on 11/10/01.
41. Address to the U.S. Ambassador, 9/13/01.
42. Message for the World Day of Peace, #14.
43. Address to the Representatives of the World Religions, Assisi 1/24/02, #6.
44. Cf. Angelus, 11/18/01 and 1/20/02.
45. Angelus 12/9/01, #1.
46. Words of Introduction, Assisi 1/24/02; cf. Angelus 1/20/01, #1.
47. Message for the World Day of Peace, #14.
48. Address to the Representatives of the World Religions, Assisi 1/24/02, #6.
49. Address to the Representatives of the World Religions, Assisi 1/24/02, #2.
50. Address to the Representatives of the World Religions, Assisi 1/24/02, #1.
51. Homily, 1/1/02, #2.
52. Address to the U.S. Ambassador, 9/13/01, #1.

53. Discourse to the Italian Security Force, 1/17/02, #2.

54. Message for the World Day of Peace, #10.

55. Urbi et Orbi message, Christmas 2001, #3-4.

56. Hora tertia, 10/11/01.