

**Reconsidering Vatican *Ostpolitik*:
The Statecraft of a Saint**

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For the past five years, Catholics and friendly observers of the global Catholic scene have been puzzled, and some have been deeply disturbed, by Vatican concessions to the People's Republic of China that have given the Chinese Communist Party a significant role in the appointment of Catholic bishops in the PRC. Those concessions have been made to a regime whose totalitarian character has been underscored by its stated determination to "Sinicize" all religions, thus subordinating them to the party-state; by its internal handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (which it likely caused and certainly exacerbated); by its systematic violation of treaty-guaranteed civil liberties in Hong Kong; and by its genocide of the Muslim Uyghurs. In light of these realities, important questions have been raised:

Why would the Vatican trust any agreement co-signed by a totalitarian power, given its previous experiences with Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Third Reich, both of which blatantly ignored the provisions of concordats they concluded with the Holy See?¹

Why have warnings from within China about the negative impact of the current Vatican/China rapprochement on Chinese Catholics who have remained loyal to Rome at considerable cost been dismissed or ignored?

Why would the Church violate its own canon law (according to which "no rights or privileges of election, appointment, presentation, or designation of bishops are conceded to civil authorities"²) in this matter?

And what motivates the dogged pursuit by professional Vatican diplomats of full diplomatic exchange at the ambassadorial level between the Holy See and the PRC?

Finding answers to these questions requires three steps back: first to 1870; then to 1929; and, finally, to 1962.

In 1870, when the forces of the *Risorgimento* captured Rome and made it the capital of a unified Italy, the last vestiges of the Papal States disappeared and Pope Pius IX retired behind the Leonine Wall, styling himself the “Prisoner of the Vatican.” Even as the Holy See maintained its international legal personality and continued to send and receive diplomatic representatives, Pius IX’s three successors tried in vain to reach an agreement with the new Italian state that would guarantee the pope’s independence from all earthly powers. That goal was finally achieved by Pope Pius XI in the 1929 Lateran Accords, which created “Vatican City State,” guaranteed its sovereign independence, and acknowledged the new microstate’s unfettered control of several extraterritorial properties.

Yet many of the Holy See’s the diplomats seem not to have grasped the full implications of the Lateran Accords. Rather, these foreign policy professionals continued to think that the new Holy See/Vatican City was essentially the equivalent of the old Holy See/Papal States: a third-tier European power that could nonetheless exert diplomatic leverage on occasion. And as Italy, while becoming an economic dynamo, became less of a consequential actor in world politics, it was natural for Italian papal diplomats to seek some significant role for “Rome” on the global stage.

Then came October 1962.

It has been insufficiently remarked that the opening of the Second Vatican Council, the most important event in Catholic history since the various Reformations of the 16th

century, coincided precisely with the Cuban Missile Crisis. Pope John XXIII and the Vatican's diplomatic service were sufficiently shaken by the geopolitical trauma of a world poised on the knife's edge of nuclear war that a profound re-direction of Vatican diplomacy toward the European communist world was devised. This became known as the *Ostpolitik*, and its principal agent was a highly regarded Vatican diplomat, Archbishop Agostino Casaroli.³

Casaroli's *Ostpolitik*, which unfolded during the pontificate of Pope Paul VI (1963-1978), aimed at finding what Casaroli called a *modus non moriendi*, a "way of not dying," for the Catholic Church behind the Iron Curtain. And that meant reaching agreements with communist regimes on the appointment of bishops. In order to appoint bishops, who could ordain priests and thus maintain the Church's sacramental life under atheist regimes, the Vatican ended the anti-communist rhetoric that had characterized its public diplomacy in the 1950s; removed several senior churchmen who refused to concede anything to communist governments; discouraged any public role for exiled Catholic leaders like Ukrainian Cardinal Josyf Slipyj; and counseled underground Catholic clergy and laity to cease or at least mute their resistance to their local communist regimes.⁴ One premise informing this dramatic transition in the Holy See's diplomatic strategy was the notion that the sharp anti-communist rhetoric of Pius XI, and Pius XII's 1949 excommunication of Catholics cooperating with communist parties or regimes, had been partially to blame for the communist persecution of the Church; the theory was that if the Vatican showed itself more accommodating (the buzzword was "dialogue"), such mellowness would be reciprocated.⁵

It wasn't. And by any objective measure the Casaroli *Ostpolitik* was a failure that in several cases made matters worse.

In Rome, it led to the serious penetration of the Vatican by East Bloc intelligence services. That counter-intelligence debacle, now well-documented from primary sources, had numerous unhappy effects. For example, it put the diplomats of the *Ostpolitik* in an even weaker position vis-à-vis their communist counterparts, because Warsaw Pact representatives frequently knew the Holy See's negotiating position, thanks to the work of well-placed moles and informers inside the Roman Curia and elsewhere.⁶

In the countries that were the *Ostpolitik*'s intended beneficiaries, there were no improvements of consequence as a result of Archbishop Casaroli's shuttle diplomacy and in some instances the Church's position was further weakened. The Hungarian Catholic hierarchy a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Hungarian state, which meant the Hungarian communist party.⁷ Repression increased in what was then Czechoslovakia, with regime-friendly faux-Catholic organizations given public prominence while underground bishops and priests worked as janitors, window-washers, and elevator repairmen, conducting clandestine ministries at night.⁸ The *Ostpolitik* did nothing to improve the situation of Catholics in the USSR: the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church remained the world's largest illegal religious community, tenaciously maintaining itself underground through clandestine institutions, and Lithuanian Catholic resistance leaders found themselves doing hard time in Gulag camps.⁹

The *Ostpolitik* had no serious effect in Poland, however. There, the wily primate, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, and the charismatic archbishop of Kraków, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, chatted politely with visiting Vatican diplomats – and then returned to the

business of strengthening the most vigorous national Catholic community in the Soviet sphere.¹⁰ When Wojtyła was elected pope in 1978, one facet of the Casaroli *Ostpolitik* was buried, as John Paul II conducted a vocal human rights campaign that was instrumental in igniting the revolution of conscience that shaped the Revolution of 1989 and the self-liberation of east central Europe from communism.

Two lessons ought to have been learned from all this. First, and whatever its good intentions, the *Ostpolitik* was a failure because the appeasement of communist regimes never works. And it never works because of the nature of those regimes and their commitment to what the Polish security service, the *Służba Bezpieczeństwa*, called the “disintegration” of the Catholic Church. Second, the only real authority the Holy See and the pope have in the modern and postmodern worlds is moral authority – and that moral authority, a form of “soft power,” can be deployed with effect.

Those lessons were not learned by the heirs of Agostino Casaroli, however, many of whom are influential figures in Vatican diplomacy today. Thus at Rome’s Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, the *Ostpolitik* is still presented to future Vatican diplomats as a model of success. And there seems to have been no intellectual reckoning with the abundant evidence demonstrating the failures of Casaroli’s diplomacy at any level of the Secretariat of State of the Holy See. This unwillingness to grasp the lessons of the failures of the 1970s continues today. And it has seriously diminished the moral authority of the Vatican and the Catholic Church in world arenas, where the Holy See is increasingly regarded as simply another international non-governmental organization.

Over the past nine years, the methods of the Casaroli *Ostpolitik* have been deployed once again as the Holy See has tried to open “dialogue” with Bashar al-Assad, Nicolás

Maduro, Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, the post-Castro Cuban leadership, and now Vladimir Putin and his ecclesiastical consort, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus'. Concurrently the transformative achievements of John Paul II and his charismatic moral leadership are being misconceived as the fruit of Casaroli's *Ostpolitik*, ignored by the Church's senior diplomats, or both. Most recently, the return of the Casaroli approach has led to a profound sense of abandonment among Ukrainian Catholics, who recognize and lament the chimerical character of the stated Vatican intention to position itself as a broker between Ukraine and Russia.

Despite – or perhaps because of – this reluctance to reckon with the old *Ostpolitik*'s failures and the failures of the revived Casaroli approach in Syria, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, China, Russia, and elsewhere, there remains much to be learned from the statecraft of John Paul II.

To be sure, in canonizing the Polish pope the Catholic Church was not recommending him as a model of statesmanship: as, for example, later generations of scholars and political leaders might lift up George C. Marshall or Alcide de Gasperi as such models. Still, John Paul II's heroic exercise of the chief virtue of statecraft – prudence – contains important lessons for those seeking to advance the peace of security, freedom, and order in world politics today.¹¹

St. John Paul II always insisted, correctly, that he was neither diplomat nor politician. He was, rather, a pastor, who in exercising his pastoral responsibilities had things to say to the world of political power. Why? Because the things he said had to do with the Church's defense of human dignity, the protection of which gives the exercise of

public authority what Aristotle might have called its distinctive “excellence,” and what the Second Vatican Council described as one of its fundamental moral purposes.¹² Yet this Polish-born pastor who refused to don the mantle of politician or diplomat, choosing instead the role of moral witness, was the most politically consequential pope in centuries, a pope whose evangelically-inspired action changed history and left a deep impression on the future. Thus the footprints of his distinctive statecraft can be found all over the world: in central and eastern Europe, which he helped liberate from communism; in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, where men and women formed by John Paul II’s social doctrine are striving to make freedom for excellence work in the political and economic fields; in the United States, Canada, and western Europe, where John Paul II’s robust defense of religious freedom as the first of human rights has taken on new, and perhaps unexpected, salience in post-modern societies threatened by what Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger called in April 2005 the “dictatorship of relativism.”¹³

The responsibilities of a pope and the responsibilities of presidents, prime ministers, and diplomats are not identical. Popes no longer deploy “hard power” in the form of armies, as they once did; democratic leaders charged with the defense of the common good must calculate the interests of the people they represent and serve in ways that popes don’t. Which is to say that popes and public officials deal with international politics out of different toolkits. Still, in this season in which things seem to be coming unhinged and the West struggles to fulfill its role as the guarantor of a measure of decency and order in world affairs, it is worth considering what statesmen who seek to defend freedom and human rights against aggressor states who care nothing for either might learn

from the distinctive global statecraft of a saint who had a real impact on what pundits like to call the “real world.”

Seven such lessons suggest themselves.

*The first lesson: **Culture comes first.***

John Paul II’s statecraft rejected the fallacies that had made political modernity a slaughterhouse. He rejected the Jacobin fallacy, born in 1789, that history is driven by politics, understood as the quest for power, with power being understood as my ability to impose my will on you. He rejected the Marxist fallacy that “history” is merely the exhaust fumes of the means of production. And he rejected the liberal fallacy that if a society only gets the machinery of democracy and the free economy right, those machines can run by themselves.¹⁴

Rather, drawing on both Catholic and Polish sources, John Paul II insisted that culture was, is, and always will be the most dynamic force in history, both positively (in terms of building and sustaining free societies) and, if you will, defensively (in terms of resisting tyranny). Moreover, he understood that at the center of culture is cult, or religion: what people believe, cherish, and worship; what people are willing to stake their lives, and their children’s lives, on.

This culture-first approach to history and statecraft was on full display during John Paul’s epic first papal pilgrimage to Poland: nine days in June 1979 on which the history of the twentieth century pivoted. What have become known as the “Nine Days of John Paul II” are sometimes described as a moment of national catharsis, and there is something to that: the pent-up frustrations, sorrows, and angers engendered by Poland’s awful experiences over two centuries – its vivisection in the late eighteenth century, its demolition by Nazis,

and its desecration by communists – began to be healed by the triumphant return of Poland’s papal son to his homeland. But a lot more went on during the Nine Days than catharsis. What happened was *transformation*: the revitalization of culture in a revolution of conscience, ignited by John Paul II’s summons to the people he knew so well – “You are not who *they* say you are. Reclaim who you really are, own the truth of your history and your culture, and you will find tools of resistance that totalitarianism cannot match.”¹⁵ (I might parenthetically note here that a similar dynamic was at work in Ukraine during the Maidan Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014, with results that have amazed the world since the Russian invasion of February 24.)

The Nine Days of John Paul II in June 1979 were, arguably, the most politically potent papal intervention in world affairs since the High Middle Ages. Yet during the Nine Days, the Pope didn’t mention politics or economics *once*. Rather, John Paul spoke the truth of Poland’s history, culture, and national self-understanding in dozens of variations on one great theme. By returning to his people the truth about themselves, he helped them forge tools of liberation that were essentially moral and cultural in nature. Deployed over a hard decade of struggle that led to the triumphs of the Revolution of 1989, those tools proved more than adequate in answering Stalin’s cynical question, “The pope? How many divisions does he have?”

*The second lesson: **Ideas count, for good and for ill.***

I doubt that John Paul II ever read John Maynard Keynes, but he certainly understood the truth of what the Cambridge economist meant when Keynes wrote this: “Both when they are right and when they are wrong, ideas are more powerful than is commonly understood. In fact, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe

themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back...Soon or late, it is ideas...which are dangerous for good or evil.”

John Paul knew the dangers of false ideas from hard experience. Living in what Timothy Snyder aptly dubbed the “bloodlands” of east central Europe, he had seen the lethal effects of Lenin’s, Stalin’s, and Hitler’s wicked ideas in the deaths of tens of millions of human beings, including his friends and classmates.¹⁶ But he also knew from experience the regenerative power of noble ideas: for example, the ideas of Christian Democracy formulated by Jacques Maritain, Luigi Sturzo, and Etienne Gilson, and then deployed by Konrad Adenaur, Alcide de Gasperi, and Robert Schuman in rebuilding post-war Europe. In both cases – the wicked, false, and death-dealing ideas, and the good, true, and ennobling ideas – what was most crucial, in John Paul II’s view, was the idea of the human person being proposed. Or to use a social science term in its philosophical sense, what counted was *anthropology*.¹⁷

And here we find the connection between Karol Wojtyła, Polish philosopher, and John Paul II, statesman. In the first decade of his pontificate, John Paul II, statesman, saw that the Yalta division of Europe was not only wrong but fragile and unsustainable, because Karol Wojtyła, Polish philosopher, knew that Stalin’s power-grab in the waning days of the Second World War was in service to a false idea of the human person: a warped anthropology that led inevitably to the Gulag, the KGB, and the entire apparatus of Soviet repression.¹⁸ In the last years of his papacy, John Paul II, statesman, knew that 21st-century Europe risked dissolving into incoherence because Karol Wojtyła, Polish philosopher, had

accurately measured the deficiencies of the atheistic humanism and soul-withering secularism that were at the root of western Europe's post-Cold War crisis of civilizational morale.¹⁹

Thus those who would learn from the example of John Paul II will take ideas, and the war of ideas, with as much seriousness as they take indices of gross national product or measures of military capability. Why? Because all three are connected. Neither wealth nor military power will be usefully deployed in the cause of freedom in the twenty-first century if the will to do so is not present. And it seems unlikely that the will to challenge the lies and propaganda of the forces of disorder, which is an essential component of restoring a measure of order to world affairs, will be formed if the political culture of the West continues to be eroded from within by skepticism, relativism, and irony; by an anthropology that reduces the human person to a mere bundle of desires; and by a nihilism that mocks all religious and moral conviction. Here, too, Ukraine has provided an example that must be seriously pondered by the older democracies.

*The third lesson: **Don't psychologize the adversary.***

One result of the decline of philosophy and the parallel rise of social science in the late-modern and postmodern West has been the emergence of psychological approaches to statecraft, as political theory has sadly disappeared from many university curricula and "political science" has become a subset of statistics. In American terms, one can trace this back to the social science theories popular among the "best and brightest" of the Kennedy/Johnson years: the mandarins who believed that a naval blockade of Cuba in 1962 was a form of "communication" and who imagined that "signaling" North Vietnam by turning the spigot of air power on and off could change Ho Chi Minh's behavior.²⁰ The

Obama-era analogue to this psychologization of statecraft was the strategy of “reset:” first with Russia and the Arab Islamic world, then with Cuba and Iran. The premise here was that bad actors behave badly because of what *we* do, so that if *we* behave differently *their* behavior will change and become less disagreeable, if not downright praiseworthy.

John Paul II knew this for the foolishness it was and is. As a keen student of the human condition, he understood that bad actors behave badly because of who they are, what they espouse, and what they seek, not because of anything “we” did to “them.” Thus he could focus on the issues at hand – religious freedom and other basic human rights in the communist world, for example – without tying himself up in knots over whether the Cold War division of Europe was somehow President Harry Truman’s fault. Unlike western revisionist historians, John Paul understood that Stalin, his heirs, and their Polish epigones did what they did because of who they were, what they believed, and what they sought, not because “Uncle Joe” Stalin had been gratuitously offended at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945.²¹

The twenty-first century lessons to be drawn from this papal clarity about the sources of conflict should be obvious. To take one urgent case: Vladimir Putin is doing what he’s doing in Ukraine, and what he previously did in Moldova, Georgia, Chechnya, and elsewhere, not because of anything Ukraine, Moldova, or other post-Soviet states did to him or to Russia, but because of who he is, what he believes, and what he seeks. Thus “narratives” of the current war in Ukraine that seek to “balance” responsibilities for the conflict or describe it as a “civil war” or “fraternal conflict” distort reality, and in doing so make creative and sensible policy virtually impossible. The same is true of the Shia totalitarians who hold ultimate authority in Tehran. Unless their behavior in seeking a

nuclear capability is understood on its own terms as an expression of their own apocalyptic ideas and ambitions, rather than as a reaction to pressures from the Sunni world, the West, or both, the world will remain vulnerable to Iranian dissembling and stalling, and the likelihood of an Iranian bomb will grow accordingly.

*The fourth lesson: **Speak loudly and be supple in deploying whatever sticks, large or small, you have at hand.***

When John Paul II was elected the 264th Bishop of Rome on October 16, 1978, Vatican diplomacy was well into the second decade of the Casaroli *Ostpolitik*, which, as noted before, avoided public condemnation of communism's human rights violations for the sake of reaching diplomatic agreements with Warsaw Pact countries. Those agreements were supposed to guarantee the Church's freedom to live its sacramental life by its own standards. They did not, and as I remarked earlier, the limited agreements that were achieved demoralized the Church in several East bloc countries, did nothing to relieve the condition of Catholics throughout the Warsaw Pact and in the Soviet Union, and opened the Vatican to further penetration by communist intelligence services – a process that had begun in the early 1960s and that has yet to be acknowledged by Vatican authorities, despite clear evidence.

Yet John Paul was shrewd enough not to dismantle the *Ostpolitik* completely or to publicly repudiate it. Rather, he made Archbishop Casaroli his Secretary of State, named him a cardinal, and gave him full rein to pursue his diplomacy east of the Elbe River. Thus no communist leader could publicly accuse the Church of renegeing on its previous commitments because of a “reactionary” Polish pope in league with NATO (although Soviet and East bloc propaganda and disinformation campaigns worked overtime to sell precisely

that message throughout the West, not without some success). Then, while Casaroli continued his bilateral diplomatic efforts, John Paul II restored the Catholic Church's "voice" in challenging human rights violations and calling upon communist states to honor their commitments under "Basket Three" of 1976 Helsinki Final Act – and did so by making his own voice the Vatican's principal voice.²² Time and again, in venue after venue, John Paul II lifted up the first freedom, religious freedom, and brought his case before the world in his 1979 address to the U.N. General Assembly.²³ Because of that papal megaphone, the resistance Church behind the iron curtain knew it had a champion; those in the West committed to supporting the resistance Church in central and eastern Europe were inspired to intensify their efforts; and all the while, the Soviet rationale for its "social model" was being systematically undercut in the order of ideas.

The Polish pope applied the same methods in his efforts to shore up those Catholic leaders working for justice and peace in Central America in the face of Marxist governments and insurgencies there. The communist tide began to recede in Central America when John Paul II vocally confronted the adolescent cheerleading of Daniel Ortega and his comrades at a 1983 papal Mass in Managua – and the entire affair, including the Pope demanding "Silence" from Ortega & Co. so that he could preach his sermon, was telecast throughout the region (thanks to the adroit work of the papal trip-planner, Fr. Robert Tucci, SJ). Yet John Paul was also willing to be the quiet persuader, working behind the scenes while local churchmen did the denouncing of injustice, when that seemed appropriate: a method that worked well in Argentina, Chile, and the Philippines, as the Pope met with (and thus gave his tacit blessing to) local human rights activists and political reformers while he worked privately on the Argentine military, on General Augusto

Pinochet, and on President Ferdinand Marcos, urging them to respect human rights and to restore democracy in their countries.²⁴

Thus the lesson for the twenty-first century: Moral pressure can be an important lever in world politics, but effective human rights advocacy and defense of the *libertas ecclesiae* require dexterity – diplomatic dexterity, and dexterity in waging the battle of ideas.

The fifth lesson: Listen to the martyrs.

The *Ostpolitik* that guided Vatican diplomacy in central and eastern Europe between 1963 and the election of John Paul II did not disrespect the persecuted local Churches behind the Iron Curtain. But it did tend to regard their intransigence as an obstacle to diplomatic accommodation between the Holy See and communist regimes. And such accommodations had to be reached, according to the *Ostpolitik*, because the Yalta division of Europe was a permanent reality of world politics, not a temporary aberration. Thus in the decade prior to John Paul's election, Pope Paul VI removed Cardinals Josef Beran and József Mindszenty from their posts in Prague and Budapest and kept the exiled leader of the Greek Catholic Church in Soviet-occupied Ukraine, Cardinal Josyf Slipyj, at a distance.

John Paul II had long “read” the reality of the martyr-confessors in the underground Churches behind the iron curtain differently. To his mind, the witness of these brave men and women, living and dead, helped strengthen a religiously informed cultural resistance to communism, because it embodied in a unique way the moral pressure that could and should be exerted on communist regimes. So during his time as archbishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła clandestinely ordained priests for service in the underground Church in Czechoslovakia, in what amounted to a tacit challenge to the Vatican's *Ostpolitik*.²⁵ As pope,

he made sure that the world (and especially the Kremlin) knew of his meeting with the Ukrainian Cardinal Slipyj, leader of the largest underground Church in the world, a month after his election. That meeting took place a few weeks after he had sent his cardinal's zucchetto to the Ostrabrama shrine at Vilnius in Lithuania as a gesture of solidarity with another long-suffering and bitterly-persecuted local Church – a gesture that was repaid within weeks as the Lithuanian Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights was formed and became one of the most dogged human rights proponents in the Soviet Union.²⁶

This pattern continued throughout the pontificate and was not limited to the Pope's support for fellow-Catholics. John Paul II deployed his own private contacts into the USSR to keep himself informed of the views of the hard-pressed human rights resistance there; one result of that clandestine papal intelligence operation was his December 1985 meeting in the Vatican with Elena Bonner, wife of Andrei Sakharov, which was arranged by one of John Paul's informal agents, Irina Ilovayskaya Alberti, former aide to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his Vermont exile.²⁷

For John Paul II, the witness of the modern martyr-confessors deserved to be honored in its own right: just as the Church demeaned itself, he believed, when it accommodated the demands of totalitarian persecutors, so the Church was strengthened by acknowledging the witness of its sons and daughters who took the risk of freedom and paid the price for it. Honoring the persecuted Church also had an important effect on the Holy See's diplomatic action in world politics, John Paul seemed to think: it acted as a brake against the Realpolitik pragmatism that is common to European foreign ministries, but that is neither realistic nor pragmatic over the long haul.

There are lessons here, for both statesmen and churchmen, in dealing with such twenty-first century challenges as the transition to a post-communist future in Cuba, the rise of an assertive China, and finding the appropriate response to the lethal threats posed by jihadist Islam to Christian communities in the Middle East and Africa. Listening to the voices of the martyr-confessors of these regions will clarify the obstacles to a better future in these difficult circumstances. Lifting up the witness of the living martyr-confessors publicly and persistently might also afford them a measure of protection, while helping sustain islands of civil society essential to future progress toward justice and peace in Cuba, China, the Middle East, and Africa.

*The sixth lesson: **Think long-term and do not sacrifice core principles to what may seem immediate advantage.***

In the mid-1980s, after martial law had been lifted in Poland but while the Solidarity trade union was still legally banned, officials of General Wojciech Jaruzelski's communist regime quietly approached Polish Church leaders with a proposal: the regime would open a national dialogue on Poland's future and the Church would act as the regime's interlocutor. Some Polish churchmen were tempted by the offer. But John Paul II refused to take the bait. Solidarity was the proper representative of Polish civil society, in his view, and the Church ought not substitute itself in that role – especially as that meant tacitly acquiescing to Solidarity's legal non-status. The Church could help facilitate a conversation between the regime and the opposition, but the Church should not replace the opposition.²⁸

That decision had theological roots. In John Paul II's ecclesiology, the Church could not be a partisan political actor because that contradicted the Eucharistic character of the Church (a theme he had stressed in challenging various forms of liberation theology in

Latin America). But it was also based on John Paul II's social doctrine. In that vision of the free and virtuous society, the Church formed the people who formed the civil society and the political institutions that did the work of politics; the Church as such was not a political agent, although the Church obviously had a voice in civil society.²⁹

In the event, the Church's refusal to play "opposition party" to the "leading role" of the communist party in Poland increased the pressure on the Jaruzelski regime to recognize the real Polish opposition, represented by Solidarity. Thus John Paul II's principled decision helped create the conditions for the possibility of the Polish Roundtable of early 1989 and the partially-free elections of June 1989. And those elections, by delivering an overwhelming victory to Solidarity, made possible the first non-communist government in post-war Polish history the following September.³⁰

The lesson here: The cause of freedom, and the cause of the Church, are best served when statesmen and churchmen think long-term and do not bracket or minimize core principles for what can seem immediate advantage. That lesson bears on the Church's role in Cuba today, where local Catholic leaders' understandable concerns to strengthen the Church's institutional infrastructure should go hand-in-hand with a vigorous defense of those dissidents who form the core of the Cuban civil society of the future. This sixth "John Paul II lesson" should also raise cautions about the Holy See's evident push for full diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. In the present circumstances, any such deal would require the Vatican to sever its diplomatic exchange with the Republic of China on Taiwan – the first Chinese democracy in history. What signal would such a deal, at such a price, send about the Catholic Church's vision of China's future? What signal would it send about the Church's concern for the hard-pressed and often-persecuted elements of

civil society that exist in China today and are pressing for a non-authoritarian and open future?

The evangelical mission of the Church in Cuba and the China of the future are not going to be materially advanced by accommodating too easily to the regnant regimes in those countries. Neither will the path beyond Castroite communism and Chinese totalitarianism.

There are also lessons here for the Holy See's role in Ukraine. The longstanding Vatican priority given to cordial ecumenical relations with the Russian Orthodox Church must be re-examined in light of the unhappy fact, now made unmistakably clear, that the current Russian Orthodox leadership, and specifically Patriarch Kirill and his chief ecumenical officer, Metropolitan Hilarion, function as tools of Russian state power, playing a tawdry role in Kremlin propaganda and disinformation campaigns and blessing aggression in the name of a false rendering of the Christian history of the eastern Slavs. Neither common ecumenical witness in defense of international legal norms nor serious theological dialogue is possible under those circumstances. Pretending otherwise merely reinforces the damage being done by aggressors.³¹

*The seventh lesson: **Media "reality" isn't necessarily reality and the statesman cannot play acolyte to such "narratives."***

The most unintentionally hilarious commentary on the public impact of Pope John Paul II came from the editorial page of the *New York Times*. John Paul was in the middle of those epic Nine Days of June 1979 when, on June 5, the *Times* ran an editorial on the papal pilgrimage with this conclusion: "As much as the visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland must

reinvigorate the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, it does not threaten the political order of the nation or of Eastern Europe.”³²

Wrong.

Why did the *Times* so badly miss the reality of what was afoot in Poland? In part, I suspect, because it regarded “the Roman Catholic Church in Poland” as of no more political consequence to “the political order of the nation or of Eastern Europe” than the Polish Flat-Earth Society (which is not a bad analogue for the *Times*’ general view of the Catholic Church). Then there was the view in the progressive world (for which the *Times* was both mirror and infallible teaching authority) that the Cold War would be resolved when an increasingly social democratic West “converged” with a liberalizing East and the Berlin Wall would simply dissolve – a “narrative” that was also popular in certain European (and Vatican) circles. And then there was the *Times*’ concern, shared by many foreign policy “realists” in the United States and western Europe, that any disturbance of the Yalta postwar order threatened nuclear holocaust; so while it might be too bad for what were once called the “captive nations,” the way things were was the way things were going to have to be, lest greater demons be set loose.

These “narratives” – the narrative of the political irrelevance of religion in the late twentieth century; the narrative of “convergence;” and the change-risks-nuclear-war narrative – seemed to be reality. But they weren’t reality; they were merely imitations or simulacra of reality. John Paul II was wise enough to know that and to act according to what was really reality: the reality that a morally informed human rights resistance, based on a clear and correct conception of the dignity of the human person, attacked communism

at its most vulnerable point and thus held one of the keys to settling the Cold War in favor of the forces of freedom.

The problem of confusing reality with “media reality” or “narrative” has intensified since 1978 because of the ubiquity of social media and instant Internet commentary, both of which readily create “narratives” that seem to be “reality.” Yet the statesmen of the twenty-first century would do well to take a lesson from John Paul II and read the “signs of the times” more acutely than is possible through lenses crafted by “narrative.” The same lesson applies to churchmen: Church leaders, clerical and lay, who respond to media-generated “narratives” about the Catholic Church rather than to the imperatives of the Gospel are not going to advance either the evangelical mission of the Church or the cause of human dignity and freedom. The Gospel has power, and its power can cut through the densest of false “narratives.”

Finally, what might be the lessons of the singular “public” effect of St. John Paul II for all of us?

While there are many admirable qualities in the life of John Paul II that we would all do well to emulate, what is perhaps most compelling and inspiring at this historical moment is his refusal to submit to the tyranny of the possible.

The great hopes that followed the Revolution of 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the various color-revolutions in the post-communist world, and the Arab Spring have often been frustrated. “History” is manifestly not over and the forces that stand for ordered liberty in the world seem to be in retreat. Too much of Latin America has reverted to chronic patterns of corruption and authoritarianism, or corruption and incompetence, or

corruption, incompetence, and authoritarianism. While much of Europe has shown admirable grit in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Russia's brutal war there, western Europe remains bedeviled by a deficit in civilizational morale that only the willfully ignorant or fanatically secular will fail to recognize as spiritual in character. That religious freedom has come under assault in the West within two decades of its vindication in the formerly communist world was not something than many expected in 1989 – or at the turn of the millennium, for that matter. What Pope Francis has aptly described as a “throwaway culture,” in which the disposable are not just consumer goods but people, is eroding the moral-cultural fabric of our civilization. Drastically different ideas of the human person, human community, and human destiny are in conflict throughout the western world.

At such a moment, it is imperative that we take a lesson from John Paul II and not bind ourselves with the self-imposed shackles of low expectations, submitting to the tyranny of the possible as the conventional wisdom of the day defines what is “possible”. Had Karol Wojtyła, on becoming John Paul II, accepted the conventional wisdom of the moment, he would have settled down to manage the inevitable decline of the Catholic Church in a world permanently divided along geopolitical and ideological fault lines defined in the 1940s. Because he believed more deeply, and thus saw more clearly, he discerned sources of renewal in the Church where others saw only decay, and he saw openings for freedom where others only saw impenetrable walls. By refusing to bend to the tyranny of the possible, he helped make what seemed impossible, not only possible, but real.

Events proved that his signature challenge on October 22, 1978 – “Be not afraid!” – was not romanticism. It was the deepest, truest realism. Or as he put it to thousands of young people in Kraków in June 1979 as they gathered near the site of the martyrdom of St. Stanisław, “Be afraid only of thoughtlessness and pusillanimity.” The world would do well to heed that summons and that challenge – which the Holy See would be in a unique position to proclaim, were it to learn the appropriate lessons from the failures of the 1970s *Ostpolitik* and the statecraft of a saint.

Notes

¹ See *Controversial Concordats: The Vatican's Relations with Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler*, Frank J. Coppa, ed. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1999).

² Canon 377.5.

³ Casaroli describes his efforts in *Il Martirio della pazienza: La Sante Sede e i paesi comunisti* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000); English translation, *The Martyrdom of Patience: The Holy See and the Communist Countries, 1963-1989* (Toronto: Ave Maria Center of Peace, 2007). A favorable treatment of the *Ostpolitik* may be found in Hansjakob Stehle, *Eastern Politics of the Vatican 1917-1989*, trans. Sandra Smith (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1981); Stehle's sources within, and relationship with, the intelligence services of the German Democratic Republic during his long journalistic career, in which he was a proponent of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, would make an interesting topic for investigation in the archives of the East German Stasi. See also George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), especially chapter three.

⁴ On the Casaroli *Ostpolitik*'s effect in Czechoslovakia, see Weigel, *The Final Revolution*, pp. 159-173.

⁵ Pius XI condemned communism in the 1937 encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*, issued in virtual tandem with his condemnation of German National Socialism in the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*. On Pius XII and communism, see Robert A. Ventrasca, *Soldier of Christ: The Life of Pope Pius XII* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 241-253. On the interestingly diverse reactions among French Catholic theologians, later influential at Vatican II, to the 1949 Holy Office decree excommunicating those cooperating with communist parties or regimes, see Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), pp. 170ff. On this entire historical period, see Anthony Rhodes, *The Vatican in the Age of the Dictators, 1922-1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

⁶ This penetration is described in detail in George Weigel, *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II – The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy* (New York: Doubleday,

2010), pp. 93-187, drawing on primary source materials from Warsaw Pact intelligence services and other communist regime agencies and institutions. See also Andrzej Grajewski, "Security Services of the Polish People's Republic Against the Vatican in 1956 - 1978," in *NKVD/KGB Activities and its Cooperation with other Secret Services in Central and Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, ed. Alexandra Grůňová (Bratislava, Nation's Memory Institute, 2008), pp. 177-197.

⁷ See Stefano Bottoni, "A Special Relationship: Hungarian Intelligence and the Vatican, 1961-1978," in *NKVD/KGB Activities and its Cooperation with Other Secret Services in Central and Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, pp.147-176.

⁸ See Weigel, *The Final Revolution*, pp. 166-173.

⁹ On Ukraine, see *Persecuted for the Truth: Ukrainian Greek-Catholics Behind the Iron Curtain*, ed. Andrew Sorokowski and Roman Skakun (Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2017). On one form of resistance Catholicism in Lithuania, see George Weigel, "Tyrants Like Putin Can't Tolerate Truth," *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2022.

¹⁰ See Weigel, *The End and the Beginning*, pp. 83-97.

¹¹ On the character of the peace that is achievable in world politics according to the Catholic tradition, see George Weigel, *Tranquillitas Ordinis: The Present Failure and Future Promise of American Catholic Thought on War and Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 357-359.

¹² See *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 73-74.

¹³ https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html

¹⁴ John Paul II deployed this analysis in the 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* and the 2003 apostolic letter, *Ecclesia in Europa*.

¹⁵ See Weigel, *The End and the Beginning*, pp. 109-116, and Weigel, *The Final Revolution*, pp. 128-143.

¹⁶ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

¹⁷ On this crucial point, see John Paul II's 1979 encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* as well as the analysis of the failure of communism in *Centesimus Annus*.

¹⁸ This anthropological point was stressed in *Centesimus Annus*. For a penetrating analysis of the Gulag as an essential part of the Soviet system rather than a Stalinist aberration, see Anne Applebaum, *GULAG: A History* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004).

¹⁹ On the 19th-century roots of post-modern European secularism, see George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), pp. 43-63.

²⁰ See David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993).

²¹ For a fresh analysis of the USSR's war aims from 1939-1945, see Sean McMeekin, *Stalin's War: A New History of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2021).

²² On the impact of Basket Three on the collapse of European communism, see Weigel, *The Final Revolution*, pp.26-30.

²³ On the development of this important text and the reaction to its delivery, see George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 327-328, 346-350.

²⁴ These initiatives are described in detail in *ibid.*

²⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 232-234.

²⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 280.

²⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 569-71.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 463-464.

²⁹ This point is stressed in the 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*.

³⁰ See Weigel, *The End and the Beginning*, pp. 167-175.

³¹ See George Weigel, "Needed: An Ecumenical Reset," *First Things*, March 9, 2022: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/03/needed-an-ecumenical-reset>

³² "The Polish Pope in Poland," *New York Times*, June 5, 1979.