

John Paul II: Exception or Illusion? - Andrea Riccardi

Wojtyla's illusion?

Relatively little has been considered about the long, complex papacy of John Paul II in terms of historiography: a full twenty-seven years, even if some of them were marked by illness. While being amply cited by Ratzinger after his election, Pope Wojtyla has gradually slipped into obscurity. During the thirty-year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Wojtyla's role received no assessment. Yet Wojtyla's papacy lasted for a quarter century of Cold War history and into the era of globalization, showing the vitality of Catholicism in various settings, despite no shortage of problems. This raises the question: was John Paul II's papacy an illusion or an exception to the decline of Christianity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries?

One might think it was an illusion, considering that the decline continued in the following decades. But the history is more complicated. Let us look at some indicators. In 1978, there were 250,000 priests in Europe; in 2003, there were 200,000, an actual drop of 50,000¹. There was, however, an increase in diocesan seminarians between 1980 and 2000: 16,438 in 1980 and 17,611 in 2000. For religious seminarians, the gain was roughly 2,000: from 7,728 to 9,268.

Should the Pope, with his personality and many initiatives, have concealed the crisis rather than tackled its causes? This argument has been made repeatedly. Martini had a mixed opinion on Wojtyla: he acknowledged his great physical and spiritual courage, his strong concentration on prayer, and most of all, "his best moments were his connections with the masses, especially young people." But he was critical of his governance, including his choices of unqualified persons. The Cardinal, setting out the beatification process, noted how John Paul II's travels and mass events obscured the profile of the local churches, concentrating the world's attention on the Pope as the "Bishop of the World." This observation was primarily made regarding Wojtyla's charismatic role, with travel playing a decisive part. His personal charisma engaged in the manner of a shepherd, an image popularized by globalization, which tends to focus attention on the leader of a verticalization process. Is such a universalist role for the Pope a usurpation of the bishops from an ecclesiological perspective? Pope Gregory the Great said as much to John Nesteutes, the archbishop of Constantinople, when he accepted the title of "ecumenical patriarch" from Emperor Maurice: it was "an indiscrete presumption" according to the Pope of Rome at that time.

Indeed, the global world encourages the personalization of the Church as the Pope and almost makes the role into a charismatic one. Thanks to the media and social networks, this is accompanied by a

¹ Ph. Jenkins, *Il Dio dell'Europa*, cit., p. 63.

disintermediation process. It should be borne in mind that Wojtyła's papacy began well before the affirmation of the global world, but the latter presented the problem of overcoming the barriers between West and East, almost encouraging global processes, especially in Europe.

The era of Benedict XVI, a theologian without a charismatic personality, demonstrates the difficulty of managing the papal function. And its restoration in popularity in the early years of Bergoglio was due largely to charisma, which forged a simple and direct relationship with the people, so much so that the question remains of whether the papacy, in the global world, should not be as much as possible a "charismatic government" (the title of my book on Wojtyła)². I note that Cardinal Tauran, the man of the Curia and a critical and institutional spirit, said that a charismatic governance was a contradiction in terms. Recent decades, however, have shown the positive features, if not the necessity, of a charismatic Pope to govern such a complex Catholicism.

It should be remembered that the beatification of John Paul II in 2011, six years before his death, by Pope Benedict (who made an exception for the longer time expected for that process partly due to the popularity of the dead Pope's reputation for sanctity), and his canonization in 2014 by Pope Francis, lie at the origin of the controversy over the overly short procedure. Wojtyła was rebuked for his lack of vigilance over the bishops' attitude on clerical pedophilia, the problems with funding Solidarność with all their connections, the events involving the Legionaries of Christ, and more. The "National Catholic Reporter," a leader in this criticism, recommended the American bishops muzzle the cult of Wojtyła as a saint³.

Clearly, there are various open or unresolved questions about Wojtyła's papacy. He perceived some events to be failures (not to be mentioned), such as the terrible genocide in 1994 in a Catholic country like Rwanda, right when the Synod of Africa was being held. The recruitment of clergy, in any case, did not suffer any significant setbacks. The Pope was firmly opposed to reconsidering celibacy for the ordination of adult married men in the Latin Church. Nevertheless, the Church of John Paul II, in its various aspects that I cannot even allude to here (the Philippines, Chile, Africa, and so forth) was an important leader in the history of his time, including in comparison to the other papacies of the 1900s.

First, his papacy fell during the times that Gilles Kepel called the *Revanche de Dieu*: the new leadership of religions in the public sphere starting in the late 1970s, which was a refutation of the

² See A. Riccardi, *Governo carismatico. 25 anni di pontificato*, Milan 2003.

³ J. Horowitz, *Sainted Too Soon? Vatican Report Cast John Paul II in Harsh New Light* in "The New York Times", 14-11-2020. See also *US bishops, please suppress the cult of St. John Paul II* in "National Catholic Reporter," November 13, 2020. See also G. Galeazzi and F. Pinotti, *Wojtyła segreto*, Milan 2011. A pointed analysis of pedophilia in the Church over the long term, but only in the French world, in C. Langlois, *On savait quoi?*, Paris 2020.

axiom of Western culture in which modernity was leading to the marginalization of religions⁴. The Pope himself was quite aware – as shown by his interfaith prayer in Assisi in 1986 – of the role of religions as an instrument of peace and coexistence, but also – conversely – a tool to legitimize war. As an example of this, one could consider the events in the former Yugoslavia.

After all, Karol Wojtyła and the Church were themselves prominent figures in the changes in Poland and Eastern Europe. The Pope's funeral in 2005 evidenced his significance to the ruling classes (recall the presence of Iranian president Khatami near American president Bush), and his religious leadership (Jews like the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Toaff, were there, not to mention Constantinople's orthodox patriarch, Athens' orthodox archbishop, and the Anglican Primate), as well as many common people flocking to Rome. Three million souls attended the funeral near Saint Peter's Square, and in the previous days another three million had filed by his casket. While some have said that these attendees were a "fragile" fact, a historian would see them as tangible expressions of importance.

It cannot be said that John Paul II's papacy was an illusory solidification of problems. Those years left a mark on the Church's history and life. It is rather the Church's history to account for this, not to repeat it or to wall it off but to understand it as part of Christianity's continuity and discontinuity. It is a challenge, however, to filter through his vast, complex heritage, one that resists simplification.

Do not be afraid!

Pope John Paul II made his debut in 1978 with a proclamation on fear: like the Easter gospel, it began by urging against fear. He looked to the peoples of the East, oppressed by Communist regimes and despairing of changes; he turned to Western Christians, daunted by a world that seemed to condemn it to decline in the face of overwhelming secularization. It is remarkable how Catholicism was for centuries a religion of fear, as Delumeau proved in his in-depth research⁵. Evoking death and judgment for a sinning soul was part of a strategy that the historian called personal "overresponsibility": a system for controlling the conscience as well as an attitude taken toward a life mined with fragilities.

Fear is still one of the most widespread of feelings in a global age, as Bauman noted, while remarking that human beings have never enjoyed as much safety as today, even though there are plenty of hazards. The global citizen feels exposed to a vast, borderless world where the Other – friend or foe? – could easily find him and take over his space⁶.

⁴ G. Kepel, *La revanche de Dieu. Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde*, Paris 1991.

⁵ See J. Delumeau, *La paura in Occidente, Storia della paura nell'età moderna*, Turin 1979.

⁶ See Z. Bauman, *Paura Liquida*, Rome-Bari 2008. Id., *Il demone della paura*, Rome-Bari 2013.

Pope John Paul II faced fear and resignation articulately, while focusing on his recommendation to share the faith of the apostles of Christ the Risen, who changed his disciples' lives and made them missionaries of the Gospel. For him, responses to fear were to be found in the Gospel rather than in a collection of political and social reassurances. It was a direct message for a weary Western Catholicism intimidated by successful secularization. John Paul II thus rejected the idea of restoring the pre-Vatican II Church, which originated with conservatives focused on the traditional human being who supported Cardinal Siri at the Conclave.

Liberation from fear was an invitation to the Polish people embroiled in a system of intimidation. And his message and presence in Poland ultimately freed those energies of hope, which drove the process leading to the changes in 1989. During the 1980s, the liberating force of Wojtyła's message was seized and released the Poles from the regime's intimidation tactics, setting free a movement for social change.

Wojtyła, not cowed by the Cold War, envisioned a united Europe. Before his election, he had expressed this in an article in the journal of Milan's Catholic University, which was headed by his friend Giuseppe Lazzati⁷. His was a geopolitical vision guided by a mystic passion. Wojtyła did not accept Cold War divisions. For him, the real borders of the European continent had been staked out by the spread of the Gospel, as it had to the East, so the "continent" thus included Russia and all the Soviet lands. This thereby highlighted two problems: Communism, which firmly ruled the border with the West, and relations with the orthodoxy, especially the patriarchy of Moscow.

Wojtyła's papacy was an era of internationalist extroversion by the Pope and the Church – remember his travels – but also a time of a certain centrality of Europe. Europe was, in fact, central to John Paul II's vision, as he looked upon the world with a conviction that safeguarding Christianity in Europe and European humanity was also vital for the other continents.

The postcolonial era had resized Europe and it had experienced a decline with "repentance and a warning," he wrote. This involved a decline in the sense of the Church's mission and of Europe in the world. The Pope, having come from the East, from a non-colonialist Europe that was still in some sense colonized, felt invested in the task of resuscitating the spirit of Europe and tearing down the walls, restarting the universalist vision of the Church. Reviving Europe's spirit, leaving the dominion of fear, set deep religious and social processes in motion. For him, Christianity, even if compressed and persecuted, was an "unarmed" force for change in its social and historical relevance.

It was the "dream of Compostela," expressed in 1982, asking Europe to recover its origins, to rebuild spiritual unity regarding pluralism, to be a "beacon of civility and stimulus of progress." "The other

⁷ K. Wojtyła, *Una Frontiera per l'Europa Dove?*, "Vita e Pensiero", 4-5-6 (1978), pp.160-168.

continents are watching you,” he reassured them⁸. This was not about European hegemony over Catholicism: in his geopolitics, the Christianity of the old continent had a function and a vocation. In 1991, from Compostela as it happened, Cardinal Martini introduced a completion: “One can say that just as Europe once was the starting point for a widespread evangelization of the world, now the evangelization of the world is tied to the re-evangelization of our continent.”⁹

The cardinal was cognizant of the complex character – not entirely negative for him – of secularization. In his view, it was to be gotten through, while grasping its positive and negative aspects: it was not to be tackled by colliding with it and excommunicating it. The cardinal’s sensibility approached that of Wojtyla in that Europe should be “re-evangelized.” Martini, who was sometimes described in the press as “anti-Wojtyla,” constantly measured himself against the Pope’s teachings and had his own original reading of it.

For the Pope, the need was to communicate the Gospel and create a new European culture: “The refoundation of European culture,” he said in Ravenna, “is the decisive and urgent undertaking of our time. Renewing society requires reawakening in it the strength of Christ’s message.”¹⁰ In this, Wojtyla was launching his charismatic authority, a historical sense fueled by messianism and his humanity and abundant energy. John Paul II’s papacy summoned up crowds even in countries with the most exhausted Christianity. More than a few people during his reign noted how his plunging personally into the crowd could be an emotional deed rather than a spiritual renewal, making his “passage” lacking in consequences. But it was a reality made of enthusiasm and hope.

Not a faith without culture

Wojtyla, an evangelizer in touch with popular piety, however, was convinced that faith must be consolidated by entering a process of deep reception, which touches the heart but also becomes culture. In 1982, he declared, “A faith that does not become culture is a faith that is not fully received, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived.”¹¹ The reception of Vatican II had challenged the so-called “Catholic culture,” which ran the risk of being a counterculture in reaction to contemporary culture. Wojtyla said, “If, in fact, it is true that faith is not identified with any culture and is independent of all cultures, it is no less true that, precisely for this reason, faith is called to inspire, to impregnate every culture.” A faith that does not become culture is only half a faith.

⁸ John Paul II, *Atto Europeistico a Santiago de Compostela*, November 9, 1982 in www.vatican.va.

⁹ G. Miccoli, *In Difesa della Fede. La Chiesa di Giovanni Paolo II e Benedetto XVI*, Milan 2007, p. 173.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Concelebrazione nella Basilica di Sant’Apollinare in Classe*, Ravenna May 11, 1986, in www.vatican.va.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Lettera di fondazione del Pontificio Consiglio della Cultura (20 maggio 1982)* at www.vatican.va.

He was in line with Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "The rupture between the Gospel and culture is undoubtedly the drama of our age, as it was of others." In Montini, there was an idea of the rupture between the world of faith and contemporary culture, born of the latter's detachment from faith. John Paul II felt that the Church, if cross-fertilized with contemporary reality, could create a new culture that considered religious experience. Certainly, the hard core of that culture the pope carried, the culture of life, was in sharp contrast with so much contemporary feeling. There was more, however. The Polish pope, who could mobilize feelings, feared a decultured faith because it was ephemeral, not transmissible between generations, and basically privatized. Significantly, Cardinal Bergoglio, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, who never went overboard in quoting Wojtyla, strongly emphasized the relationship between faith and culture suggested by John Paul II. He said, echoing Wojtyla, that "a faith that does not become culture is not a true faith." Wojtyla believed in a "considered faith." In 1998, the Pope published an encyclical on philosophy, *Fides et Ratio*, which concludes, "I ask *everyone* to look deeply at man, whom Christ saved in the mystery of his love, and at his constant search for truth and meaning."

"We moderns," wrote Eliade, "are destined to awaken to the life of the spirit through culture."¹² The religious scholar was convinced of this, noting the anthropological difference between modern believers and those of previous ages, precisely in their relationship with the spiritual world.

Certainly, millenary religions represent great cultures (as Pius XI called them, "religious cultures"). In an experiential and mystical way, Wojtyla recognized the reality of the *homo religiosus* present in the faithful of all religions. This is where dialog and confluence come in. In 1986 in Assisi, still in the Cold War climate, the pope became the bearer of the culture of interreligious dialogue, convening leaders from the major religions in the city of St. Francis. It was an original message from a Pope who had seen how, at that time, religions risked becoming an ideology that would sanctify war. Khomeini's revolution took place in 1979 and an "Islamic liberation theology" was spreading, and the Pope had perceived how religions (and not just Islam) could become militant ideologies.

In Assisi, in an atmosphere of dialog, the religions, which were no longer praying against each other as they had in the past but alongside each other, should have established a civilized coexistence in which prayer would purify hearts and friendship would replace atavistic enmities. Wojtyla's proposal was not appreciated by Cardinal Ratzinger, who was attentive to the peculiar mission of the Church in its original Christian identity, fearing that the Pope would become the president of a gathering of faiths that were all equal and on the same level, launching a dialog of political correctness.

¹² Cf. M. Eliade, *La Prova del Labirinto. Intervista con Claude-Henri Rocquet*, Milan 1982, p. 60.

Assisi was one aspect of the “new” culture that Wojtyła was creating with his action. For many countries, the reading that the Pope was doing on the history of the nations he was visiting to research their identity was valuable in recently founded states with little historical/political awareness. John Paul II was propounding a theology of nations and felt the value of them in history while bringing them together in the preeminent family of nations. Wojtyła's universalism was tied to a coexistence among religions and different ethnic/cultural identities. The historical dimension, including for nations (see his re-reading of Polish history, which values the seasons of coexistence among Poles, Jews, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians), was strongly cultivated in Wojtyła. This can be seen in his last book, *Memory and Identity*, dedicated to the second World War as well as the nation and Poland¹³.

Everything can change!

Wojtyła's wake-up call to the Polish people, channeling a movement liberating them from the Marxist regime, was conducted with political skill in an atmosphere of advancements, protests, and cautious arrests. This was a “liberation theology” applied by a pope who had condemned liberation theologies in Latin America primarily for their use of Marxism (but how could it be said that Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian liberationist theologian, was a Marxist?). Marxism as an ideology and Marxist systems represented a form of coercion for man, one that Wojtyła was not willing to compromise on (even if diplomatic contacts with the governments were necessary). If Poland made a decisive contribution to the liberation of the East, then Wojtyła's role in Poland was more significant than is generally acknowledged by political historians.

In Poland in 1989, a paradigm consecrated by two hundred years of history was overturned: that great revolutionary changes were accompanied by violence exhibited and, above all, practiced more or less intensely. The events of 1989 marked an overcoming of the idea of violent revolution and class struggle. It is well known how the Church had felt since the 19th century – for a complexity of historical reasons – its divorce from the working class, which pursued social self-redemption. In reality, in the 1980s, workers, intellectuals, Catholics, and the Church fought together in Poland for the end of the regime.

The events of 1989 were a reversal of the paradigm established in 1789 by the French Revolution, thereby moving away from violent forms of change: a peaceful transition was possible (this path was later followed in many African countries in the 1990s). Bronisław Geremek, the great Polish historian and protagonist of *Solidarity*, wrote, “It was a revolution against the Jacobin idea, first of all against its methods, against violence, terror, and bloodshed, but also against the centralization of power and

¹³ John Paul II, *Memoria e identità. Conversazioni a cavallo dei millenni*, Milan 2020.

the omnipotence of the state....”¹⁴ He concluded, “The revolution of 1989 dealt the death blow to the 1789 revolution. It ended two centuries of French revolution.”

The struggle for peaceful transition, as Wojtyla reiterated in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, did not cause deaths but required patience, sacrifice, lucidity, and moderation. John Paul II recalled that this struggle was born “from the power of prayer.”¹⁵ The Church, by preserving a spiritual and social space, preserved the hope of liberation (and a protected public space). The revolutions of 1989 showed the strength of the spirit and the conscience in a complex political framework full of interferences. In a certain sense, they were the expression of the deep spiritual currents that inhabit history, to use an expression dear to Giorgio La Pira, whose spiritual geopolitics resembled that of Wojtyla.

This is the position of another protagonist of the liberation of the East, Václav Havel, with his affirmation of the “power of the powerless,” when he urged people not to be ashamed of love, solidarity, compassion, and tolerance, “but on the contrary to liberate these fundamental dimensions of our humanity from exile in the private sphere....” Bringing these dimensions into the public space was disruptive: it was the liberation of the soul, he said, from totalitarianism, which had annihilated all civil and moral resources. A new appreciation for the “force of the spirit” and not for violence as an engine of change was destined to become prominent in many events in the 21st century, which have not always been successful but have shaken consciences, rallied people, and made established regimes tremble. Think of the so-called Arab Spring, which gained lasting results only in Tunisia, as well as more recent movements, such as those in Lebanon or Hong Kong, driven by younger generations.

The layman Havel and the Pope were on the same wavelength: “I do not know, if I know, what a miracle is,” said Havel, welcoming Wojtyla in Prague in 1990. “In a country devastated by the ideology of hatred, the messenger of love arrives; in a country devastated by the government of the ignorant, the living symbol of culture arrives; in a country devastated until recently by the idea of confrontation and a divided world, the messenger of peace and dialogue, of mutual tolerance arrives....”¹⁶

Wojtyla's Christianity showed the “power of the spirit.” How was the Yalta order overthrown? Wojtyla told Frossard that it seemed that only a war could do it, but “it was suddenly overcome by the non-violent action of men who, while always refusing to yield to the power of force, were able to

¹⁴ B. Geremek, *L'historien et le Politique. Entretiens avec Bronislaw Geremek Recueillis par Juan Carlos Vidal*, Montricher 1999, p. 397.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Lettera Enciclica Centesimus Annus* in www.vatican.va.

¹⁶ M. Zantovsky, *Havel A Life*, London 2014, p.385.

find an effective way to bear witness to the Truth. Thus,” he concluded, “they disarmed their adversary.”¹⁷

Wojtyla's idea was a world without walls, which he felt was the Church's intimate ideal. He noted as early as 1989 that “not a few borders tend to close.” Migrants are not simply a sociological fact. In them one encounters Christ. “For the believer, welcoming the other is not only philanthropy or a natural concern for one's fellow human being. It is much more, because in every human being he knows he encounters Christ, who is waiting to be loved and served...” Ten years later, he, the theologian of the nation, reaffirmed a universalism far removed from national Catholicism: “the Church is by her nature in solidarity with the world of migrants, who, with their variety of languages, races, cultures, and customs, remind her of her condition as a pilgrim people... This perspective helps Christians to abandon any nationalistic thinking...” He arrived at a new definition of Catholicism. “It is not only manifested in the fraternal communion of the baptized but is also expressed in the hospitality assured for the stranger, whatever his religious affiliation.”

The initial question returns: was John Paul II's papacy an exception to the long wave of deterioration that had been building since the end of the 1960s? His years cannot be removed from their continuity with the history of the Church that precedes and follows them. His pontificate, however, was not an illusion due to his role as a great communicator endowed with charisma. The Church has affected history in a unique way in recent centuries. And Wojtyla's Church knew how to speak to young people into the 21st century, leaving behind a new generation.

If there is anything unrepeatable about that historic time, one must, however, also try to read the complex lesson of a pontificate. With his culture, his characteristic sensitivity, his prophetic and Polish messianism, his faith, Karol Wojtyla tried to achieve a “Christianity in history” beyond the inhibitions of fear and ideologies. He was convinced of the power of the change that Christians can make in life and history. In 2003, when he was ill, he told the diplomatic corps, “*But everything can change. It depends on each of us. Everyone can develop in himself his own potential for faith, probity, respect for others, and dedication to the service of others.*”¹⁸

The charismatic papacy: a legacy or an exception?

I have called the pontificate a “charismatic government.”¹⁹ The pope did not renounce governing and used the institutions of the Curia, but he also provided space for moments and actions inhabited by a

¹⁷ See A. Frossard, *Conversando con Giovanni Paolo II*, Milan 1989.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Discorso al Corpo diplomatico*, January 13, 2003, at www.vatican.va.

¹⁹ See A. Riccardi, *Governo carismatico*, cit.

strong charismatic tension: meetings, trips, youth days, pilgrimages, symbolic gestures, gatherings of all kinds, movements, lay people, enhancement of extra-institutional religious initiatives, etc.

His figure did not shed his traditional clothes, he did not move away from the papal palace or the models of his predecessors, from the system of government established by Paul VI, yet he pushed the boundaries of papal ritual, of protocol, of the tradition that exalted the continuity of the papacy more than the personality of the individual pope. John Paul II made original and symbolic sorties beyond the traditional borders that he did not disavow but inhabited in an original way. He was a mixture, if you will, of a “sovereign pontiff,” an heir to a long tradition, aware of the ceremonial and administrative aspects of the function, and of a charismatic leader who could venture beyond the classical canons to use gestures and an original language made of words, physical expressions, and a choice of places. He moved between the institution’s range and the scope of charisma in both his personal role and the world of the Church. He guided the institution and favored charismatics.

He remained the pope, but he was a charismatic leader with a strong authority in humanity, as can be seen in his relationships with people: he met everyone, spoke in the most diverse places, listened, visited as many countries as possible, and introduced the mobility of the papacy. His relationship with the younger generations (a difficult area for the Church since those years) was of great interest. His meetings with young people were one of the most charismatic aspects of his papacy, showing an ability to attract the younger generations.

The great Italian correspondent Igor Man, an acute observer, wrote in 2000, “Faced with a generation of Western parents who are not very capable of being fathers and mothers, young people have been attracted by the sincerity of the ‘Great Grandfather,’ the Pope.” The pope did not shy away from stadium cheering, but he also did not renounce the originality of his message. He presented himself as weak and sick as he was – for example, in 2000 at World Youth Day in Rome – but was inhabited by a spirit that commanded respect from young people (even when they did not accept his message in its entirety) as a “postmodern prophet,” to quote Igor Man.

For John Paul II, it was a matter of enhancing the charismatic side of the Church. This vision was reflected in his consideration of popular and Marian piety, which he pursued by visiting many shrines. In his Marian devotion there was a strong understanding of Mary’s charismatic figure in the Church. He attached great importance to this aspect and paid attention to the movements that arose in a charismatic manner in the Church, which he encouraged as an active part of evangelization. The new communities and movements, different realities among themselves, classified somewhat forcibly in this category, represented another conception of his approach to the people and to the territory with respect to the parish. John Paul II, as we have said, was convinced that this group of realities was an important charismatic space. He recognized its complex and innovative impact at Pentecost 1998:

“[T]he movements officially recognized by ecclesiastical authority are offered as forms of self-realization and reflections of the one Church. Their birth and spread brought unexpected and sometimes even disruptive novelty into the life of the Church. This has not failed to arouse questions, uneasiness and tensions; at times it has led to presumptions and intemperance on the one hand, and not a few prejudices and reservations on the other.”

The Pope presented his approach to the movements and the Church by saying, “Today, a new stage is opening before you: that of ecclesial maturity.” It was a stage not only for the movements but for ecclesial life, the “communion” between institutional and charismatic aspects. Pope Wojtyla also said:

“The institutional aspect and the charismatic aspect are almost co-essential to the constitution of the Church and contribute, albeit in different ways, to its life, its renewal and the sanctification of the People of God. It is from this providential rediscovery of the charismatic dimension of the Church that, before and after the Council, a singular line of development of ecclesial movements and new communities was affirmed.”²⁰

This affirmation came from the experience of his twenty years in the pontificate, conducted (not always successfully) in the delicate conjunction between the institutional ministry and the charismatic aspect. There was a theme to be developed in the Church that was identifiable not only with the new communities, but also with the new charismatics in the life of the communities and parishes.

Regarding the new communities, as if in response to the difficulties between movements and bishops, the Pope had taken on his relationship with this world directly, as the papacy did with the religious in history, binding them to himself. Did the movements and the new communities, as they were at the end of the 20th century, entirely represent the charismatic space that was co-essential to the Church and a candidate for renewal? Wojtyla had the idea of a greater dynamic to be developed in the Church: in short, something above and beyond. In 1983, while commemorating the Russian intellectual Ivanov, he said, “In the rich Slavic tradition, all the people are theologians, Christophers....”

In Latin America, he had perceived the institutional limitation of Catholicism in the face of the growth of neo-Protestant movements. As Hervieu Léger noted, “Catholicism as such is massively perceived as a ‘cold religion,’ prescriptive and administered from above.” And the scholar added, “Enthusiasm for Catholic personalities out of the ordinary... is affirmed, if one can say so, in spite of the institution.”²¹ The sociologist continued, “this superficial perception of a grim Catholicism is associated... with the idea that Catholic morality is a morality of repression of pleasure, a morality

²⁰ John Paul II, *Discorso ai Movimenti Ecclesiali e alle Nuove Comunità*, May 30, 1998, at www.vatican.va.

²¹ D. Hervieu-Léger, *Catholicisme la Fin d'un Monde*, cit., p. 133.

that constricts, by definition, the fundamental right of each person to achieve his happiness in the ways he chooses.”²²

Wojtyla intended to overcome these limitations, even if he did not distort the Church’s message. Jubilee 2000, which he had seen as a goal since his election in 1978, was a great opportunity for him: it was to be a proposal for the Church’s self-reform. Imbued with messianic visions, he saw the entry into the new millennium as a decisive step. One must look carefully at the papal documents for the Jubilee, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* and *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, in which the hand and thought of John Paul II are strongly felt. At the end of 2000, the proposal for reform addressed to the Church at the end of the Jubilee was “to make the Church the *home and the school of communion*.” It was necessary to revisit all areas, including the institutional areas of the Church, in light of the “spirituality of communion,” transfiguring them. The old Pope, as if to reform the Church, stated, “To this end, we need to make our own the ancient wisdom which, without prejudice to the authoritative role of pastors, knew how to encourage them to listen as widely as possible to the whole People of God... St. Benedict reminds the Abbot of his monastery, inviting him to consult the younger members of the community, ‘The Lord often inspires a better opinion in a younger person.’ And St. Paulinus of Nola exhorted, ‘Let us breathe from the mouths of all the faithful, for in every believer the Spirit of God blows.’”²³

It was also a challenge to the pastoral governance of dioceses and to a more communal life. The “challenge of the millennium” was to dilate the spaces of communion in a Church that was still pyramidal, letting charismatic and popular expressions grow, exercising the ministry more in listening to the people of God. A proposal that the machine of events of the Jubilee, also propitiated by Wojtyla, perhaps had put in the background. Some events, however, indicated a strong awareness of the Church, such as the request for forgiveness for the sins committed by the Church and her children, which is backed by a robust theological reflection, without which Catholicism would have had trouble facing the difficulties of the 21st century. Or the celebration of the new martyrs at the Colosseum, which highlighted in an original and challenging way how the Church of the 20th century is a Church of martyrs.

A reform did not take place because of the pope's health, but also because it was not considered relevant by the structures of the Church, where the Pope had no power to impose it. This reform, however, had a premise in the recognition of the charismatic space in the Church, doubtless one to be expanded. But it also pointed to the centrality of the Gospel: The Pope called for a “return to the Gospel” almost as if he were distancing himself from the many pastoral programs then cultivated in

²² *Ibid*, p. 134.

²³ John Paul II, *Lettera Apostolica Novo Millennio Ineunte*, in www.vatican.va .

the dioceses (the culture of the pastoral program goes back to the culture of the plan typical of organizations, including political and trade union organizations, since the 1920s). In *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, he wrote:

“It is not a question, then, of inventing a ‘new program.’ The program is already there: it is the one that has always been there, gathered from the Gospel and from living Tradition. In the final analysis, it is centered in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved, and imitated, in order to live in him the life of the Trinity and to transform history with him until its fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem. It is a program that does not change as the times and cultures change, even if true dialogue and effective communication take into account the time and the culture.”

The reconsideration of Wojtyla's pontificate is important considering the reflection on its decline, which seems to be a reality in our European world and in the life of the Church: the themes of fear, culture as a space for Christianity, charismatics, the incidence of Christianity in history (“transforming history with it...” he wrote), reform in communion even of diocesan life, and finally the return to the Gospel. The reality is that, in some way, Wojtyla's pontificate, so long and complex, closed without a reconsideration and was not succeeded by a reflection. His legacy was in part articulated in different segments allocated to the most diverse, sometimes contradictory positions. After all, John Paul II has been more recalled by the pro-life movements on issues close to their hearts than for other aspects of his pontificate. But his entire papacy is the history of more than a quarter of a century of the Church.