

# Who is afraid of Pope John Paul II?

by Claudio Celani

If the television-addicted average citizen bought the new book written by Pope Paul John II thinking that he would find something “easy” to read, or even entertaining, his disappointment would be understandable. But when a newspaper like the *Washington Post*, which represents a part of the American establishment, or the London *Independent* (representing the British establishment), publishes commentaries which treat *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* as a failure because it does not present religion in a soap-opera format, and assault the author with astonishing verbal violence, then the story is a different one.

And if someone, commenting on the pope’s nomination of 30 new cardinals, points to the fact that in his choice, the pope has been led by the preoccupation with ensuring a continuity of leadership for the Catholic Church in the future, that is an obvious remark. But if, instead, the event is reported by some journalist as a pretext to argue that the pope is planning his succession because he is sick and close to death, and to suggest that the pope should better resign before damaging the church, we can call this black propaganda. But that is what the international media did, after the Vatican announced, on Sunday, Oct. 30, the list of the 30 new cardinals appointed by the pope.

## We are dealing with enemies of the pope

The media black propaganda was so pervasive, that even Vittorio Messori, the author of the book-length interview with Wojtyla, spoke of “an operation,” and “a not-too-hidden attempt to force him to resign.”

Meanwhile, Pope Paul John II defied all rumors about his health during his trip to Sicily on Nov. 3-5. Wojtyla has never hidden his illnesses; he has done quite the opposite. But for the first time, he spoke to the assembled crowds, not sitting but standing on his feet, which demonstrates that, after hip-replacement surgery six months ago, his leg is recovering normally. Also, in announcing his trip to Manila next January for the International Youth meeting, the pope said in a funny gesture that he will take his cane with him, despite the fact that he does not need it to support his leg any longer. Then, to the tens of thousands cheering him, he said, “I see that you are pro-cane and not anti-cane.”

Both in the reactions to Pope John Paul II’s book and to

the 30 new cardinals, we are dealing with enemies of the pope both outside and inside the Catholic Church, representing circles which are badly hurt by Wojtyla’s effort to elevate, both spiritually and materially, the condition of humanity. For such circles, who would like to see the pope removed from his position, the idea of a successor who will continue John Paul II’s actions is a nightmare.

Coming after the pope’s personal victory against depopulation projects at the U.N. International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Wojtyla’s book-interview is a powerful instrument delivered to the world Catholic community in order to strengthen its belief in Christ and motivate the church in the fight for improving the spiritual and material condition of humanity. Wojtyla’s book, the first ever written by a sitting pope for a general audience, is both firm in doctrine, as well as ecumenical in its approach toward other religions. But when it comes to evil, John Paul II is not ecumenical: You have to fight it—period.

Wojtyla does not just say that you must fight evil, but he identifies evil very precisely, both from a cultural and a political standpoint (as the brief excerpts below suggest). Culturally, it is today’s “neo-positivistic age” which is the continuation of a turn in philosophical history detaching morality from truth, initiated by René Descartes, continued by Immanuel Kant, and including all the British empiricists. Politically, the pope makes it very clear that evil is represented by the continuation of British imperialism when he shares Mahatma Gandhi’s criticism of Christianity: “Could a man who was fighting for the liberation of his great nation from colonial dependence accept Christianity in the same form as it had been imposed on his country by those same colonial powers?”

That is why today’s heirs to the colonial powers reacted explosively to his book, and publish articles such as Coleman McCarthy’s column which appeared in the *Washington Post* and *International Herald Tribune* on Nov. 1.

“To call John Paul’s *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* a book is stretching it,” wrote McCarthy. “Superficial jottings is closer to the fact. An honest title to this 227-page work that has an international first printing of 20 million copies and a \$6 million advance would have been: ‘Random Thoughts I Dashed Off While Not Busy Running the Church.’” Almost anything could be said against the pope’s book, except that it is superficial. And even the *Washington Post* scribbler contradicts himself on this later on, when, obsessed by Wojtyla’s insistence on the figure of Christ, he wrote: “Such words and ideas are edifying. They are sincere. They are noble. But they don’t qualify as literature.” Leaving to the reader’s imagination what his definition of literature is, McCarthy ends his ravings by saying: “By accepting a big-bucks deal for a paste-up book, the pope is just another pseudo-author letting agents and publishers cash in on his celebrity. The papacy is cheapened.”

The other major attack against Wojtyla came from direct

British circles. In the *Independent*, Monica Furlong calls the book “flat” and the pope’s style “rarely affected by humor and imagination.” The pontiff’s mind “has been programmed to run on rails.”

Another British outlet, the satire magazine *Private Eye*, sent out a couple of messages in its attacks on the pope’s book. It wrote that “the account [Wojtyla] gives of Descartes is a travesty,” and that “more disturbingly, this pope evidently now believes that the assassination attempt he survived in 1981 was nothing less than a direct message from God.” *Private Eye*’s discomfort may not be so surprising, given that British intelligence is a prime suspect for that attempt.

### A Trojan horse inside the church

The other papal initiative, the nomination of 30 new cardinals, provoked hostile reactions from a faction of neo-heretics based in Tübingen, Germany, whose candidate was Mainz Bishop Karl Lehmann. Lehmann was not named cardinal despite the fact that he is head of the German Bishops Conference.

There is a reason for that: Lehmann, a scholar of pro-Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger, belongs to a peculiar group of Catholics who do not believe in Christ and in eternal truth, and have replaced them with religious “behaviors” which must, like all other behaviors, be accommodated to fashion. Lehmann’s conduct has increasingly led to conflict with Rome, especially on the subject of the family. Prior to the Cairo conference, Lehmann’s Bishops Conference had authorized a pro-malthusian paper; most recently, he has violated the church doctrine which treats marriage as an inviolable sacrament. For this reason, he was summoned to Rome, where he had to accept an official document condemning his practice.

Lehmann’s elevation to the College of Cardinals was highly improbable. Nevertheless, Hans Küng, a member of his supporters’ club, called his missed election “an affront to the German church.” “Thus, the way was closed to a German progressive cardinal,” said Küng, who added that “the greatest majority of German Catholics does not feel represented” by cardinals like Joseph Ratzinger, Joachim Meisner, and Alfons Stickler. Another “Lehmann boy,” Eugen Drewermann—who has been leading a movement of defiance against the Vatican in Germany—called the pope “a vampire in priest’s robes.”

Attacks against the pope in Germany are relevant not just for the future of the Catholic Church. In the context of the oligarchical plans for a re-play of a 1914 scenario on the European continent, the way the Catholic Church goes in Germany decides the way the country goes in Europe and vis-à-vis Russia. The presence of a strong moral authority represented by the Catholic Church under the pope’s leadership, and its effect on the conduct of other churches, is a major impediment to destabilization.

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## Documentation

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*The following brief excerpts from Crossing the Threshold of Hope (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) serve to indicate what has His Holiness’s adversaries fear in the new book. Chapters 4 and 5 (“Does God Really Exist?” and “‘Proof: Is It Still Valid?’”) stand out, both by themselves, and in the light of the way the pope’s London-led opponents, including the so-called “conservative” ones, act as if those chapters had never been written. All emphasis is original.*

Ch. 2: . . . [P]rayer reflects all created reality; it is in a certain sense a *cosmic function*.

*Man is the priest of all creation; he speaks in its name, but only insofar as he is guided by the Spirit.*

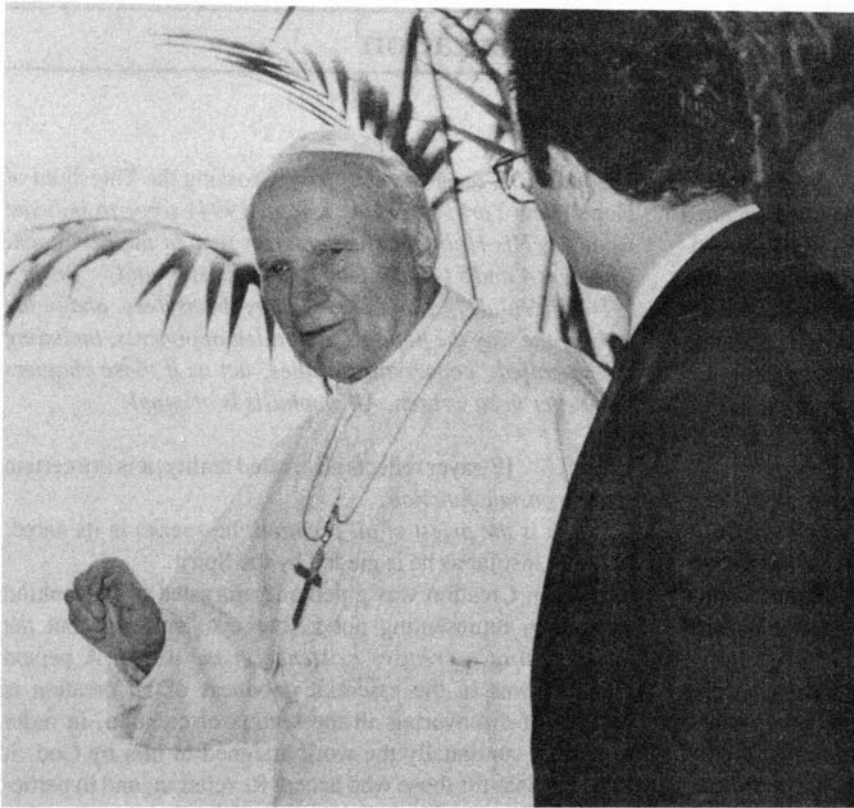
Ch. 3: Creation was given and entrusted to humankind as a duty, representing not a source of suffering but *the foundation of a creative existence in the world*. A person who believes in the essential goodness of all creation is capable of discovering all the secrets of creation, in order to perfect continually the work assigned to him by God. It must be clear for those who accept Revelation, and in particular the Gospel, that it is better to exist than not to exist. And because of this, in the realm of the Gospel, there is no space for any nirvana, apathy, or resignation. Instead, there is a great challenge to perfect creation—be it oneself, be it the world.

Ch. 4: *The Christian tradition before Thomas Aquinas*, and therefore also Augustine, was tied to Plato, from whom it nonetheless rightfully wanted to distance itself. . . .

Saint Thomas, however, did not abandon the philosophers’ approach. He began his *Summa Theologica* with the question “*An Deus sit?*”—“Does God exist?”. . . You ask the same question. This question has proven to be very useful. Not only did it create theodicy, but *this question has reverberated* throughout a highly developed Western civilization.

Ch. 6: Nevertheless, your question [why does God not reveal himself more evidently?—ed.] contains *statements that re-echo the Old and New Testaments*. When you speak of God as hiding, you use almost the same language as Moses, who wanted to see God face to face but could only see his “back”. . . . Isn’t knowledge through creation suggested here?

Ch. 7: The Creator, from the beginning, saw a multitude of good in creation; He saw it especially in man, made in His image and likeness. He saw this good in His incarnate Son. He saw it as a duty for His Son and for all rational creatures. Pushing the divine vision to the limits, we can say that God saw this good specifically in the Passion and in the Death of His Son.



*Pope John Paul II meets with German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel in Bonn, December 1993. The Catholic Church in Germany is in an uproar, since Mainz Bishop Karl Lehmann was passed over in the nomination of 30 new cardinals.*

This good would be confirmed at the Resurrection, which is the beginning of a new creation, the rediscovery of all creation in God, of the final destiny of all creatures.

Ch. 8: I put Descartes in the forefront because he marks the beginning of a new era in the history of European thought and because this philosopher . . . inaugurated the *great anthropocentric shift in philosophy*. “I think, therefore I am” as previously mentioned, is the motto of modern rationalism.

All the rationalism of the last centuries—as much in its Anglo-Saxon expression as in its Continental expression in Kantianism, Hegelianism, and the German philosophy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries up to Husserl and Heidegger—can be considered a continuation and an expansion of Cartesian positions. The author of *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* with his ontological proofs, *distanced us from the philosophy of existence*, and also from the traditional approaches of Saint Thomas which lead to God who is “autonomous existence,” *Ipsium esse subsistens*. By making subjective consciousness absolute, Descartes moves instead toward *pure consciousness of the Absolute*, which is *pure thought*. Such an Absolute is not *autonomous existence*, but rather *autonomous thought*. Only that which corresponds to human thought makes sense. The objective truth of this thought is not as important as the fact that something exists in human consciousness.

We find ourselves on the threshold of *modern immanentism* and *subjectivism*. Descartes . . . turns his back on meta-

physics and concentrates on the philosophy of knowledge. Kant is the most notable representative of this movement.

Though the father of modern rationalism certainly cannot be blamed for the move away from Christianity, it is difficult not to acknowledge that he created the climate in which, in the modern era, such an estrangement became possible. It did not happen right away, but gradually.

Ch. 13: Here the [Vatican II] Council document [*Nostrae Aetate*] brings us to the *Far East*—first of all to Asia, a continent where the Church’s missionary activity . . . has borne, we must recognize, very modest fruit. . . .

Even if faith in Christ reaches hearts and minds, the negative connotations associated with the image of life in Western society (the so-called Christian society) present a considerable obstacle to the acceptance of the Gospel. Mahatma Gandhi, Indian and Hindu, pointed this out many times, in his deeply evangelical manner. He was disillusioned with the ways in which Christianity was expressed in the political and social life of nations. Could a man who fought for the liberation of his great nation from colonial dependence accept **Christianity** in the same form as it had been imposed on his country by those same colonial powers?

Ch. 14: Christian mysticism in every age up to our own—including the mysticism of marvelous men of action like Vincent de Paul, John Bosco, Maximilian Kolbe—has built up and continues to build up **Christianity** in its most essential element. It also builds up the **Church** as a community of

faith, hope, and charity. It builds up civilization, particularly “Western civilization,” which is marked by a *positive approach to the world*, and which developed thanks to the achievements of science and technology, two branches of knowledge rooted both in the ancient Greek philosophical tradition and in Judeo-Christian Revelation. The truth about God the Creator of the world and about Christ the Redeemer is a powerful force which inspires a positive attitude toward creation and provides a constant impetus to strive for its transformation and perfection. . . .

A separate issue is the *return of ancient gnostic ideas under the guise of the so-called New Age*. We cannot delude ourselves that this will lead toward a renewal of religion. It is only a new way of practicing gnosticism—that attitude of the spirit that, in the name of a profound knowledge of God, results in distorting His Word and replacing it with purely human words. Gnosticism never completely abandoned the realm of Christianity. Instead, it has always existed side by side with Christianity, sometimes taking the shape of a philosophical movement, but more often assuming the characteristics of a religion or para-religion in distinct, if not declared, conflict with all that is essentially Christian.

Ch. 15: . . . [T]he religiosity of Muslims deserves respect. It is impossible not to admire, for example, their *faithfulness to prayer*. The image of believers in Allah who, without caring about time or place, fall to their knees and immerse themselves in prayer remains a model for all *those who invoke the true God*, in particular for those Christians who, having deserted their magnificent cathedrals, pray only a little or not at all.

Ch. 20: By your question you confirm that in *the fall of Communism* the action of God has become almost visible in the history of our century. We must be wary of oversimplification. What we refer to as Communism has its own history. It is the history of protest in the face of injustice, as I recalled in the encyclical *Laborem Exercens*—a protest on the part of the great world of workers, which then became an ideology. But *this protest has also become part of the teaching of the Church*. We need but recall the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, from the end of the last century. We add: *this teaching is not limited to protest, but throws a far-seeing glance toward the future*. In fact, it was Leo XIII who in a certain sense predicted the fall of Communism, a fall which would cost humanity and Europe dearly, *since the medicine*—he wrote in his encyclical of 1891—*could prove more dangerous than the disease itself!* The Pope said this with all the seriousness and the authority of the Church’s Magisterium.

Ch. 22: . . . Above all else, *much prayer* is needed, as well as great commitment to the task of profound conversion, which can only be brought about by common prayer and joint efforts on behalf of justice, peace, and the shaping of the temporal order ever more fully in accordance with Christian values, on behalf of everything that the mission of Christians in the world demands.

Ch. 27: The media have conditioned society to listen to what it wants to hear. . . . An even worse situation occurs when theologians, and especially moralists, ally themselves with the media, which obviously pay a great deal of attention to what they have to say when it opposes “sound doctrine.” Indeed, *when the true doctrine is unpopular, it is not right to seek easy popularity*. . . .

Naturally, the words of Christ remain true when He warns about those burdens which certain teachers, unwilling themselves to carry them, load upon others. . . . But we have to consider *which is the greater burden—the truth, even the most demanding truth, or, instead, an appearance of truth, which creates only the illusion of moral honesty*. The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* helps us to face this fundamental dilemma which people seem to be recognizing. I think, in fact, that today this dilemma is better understood than in 1968, when Paul VI published the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

Ch. 29: . . . *Man cannot be forced to accept the truth*. He can be drawn toward the truth only by his own nature, that is, by his own freedom, which commits him to search sincerely for truth and, when he finds it, to adhere to it both in his convictions and in his behavior. . . .

. . . Therefore, the more a good conscience prevails the more people and social groups move away from blind willfulness and endeavor to conform to the objective norms of moral behavior. Nonetheless, it often happens that conscience errs through invincible ignorance, without, for this reason, losing its dignity. But this cannot be said of the man who does very little to search for truth and good, or when through the habit of sin conscience itself becomes almost blind” (*Gaudium et Spes* 16).

Ch. 30: So the development of my studies centered on man—on the human person—can ultimately be explained by my *pastoral concern*. And it is precisely from a pastoral point of view that, in *Love and Responsibility*, I formulated the concept of a *personalistic principle*. This principle is an attempt to translate the commandment of love into the language of philosophical ethics. *The person is a being for whom the only suitable dimension is love*. We are just to a person if we love him. This is as true for God as it is for man. Love for a person *excludes the possibility of treating him as an object of pleasure*. This is a principle of Kantian ethics and constitutes his so-called second imperative. This imperative, however, is negative in character and does not exhaust the entire content of the commandment of love. If Kant so strongly emphasized that the person cannot be treated as an object of pleasure, he did so in order to oppose Anglo-Saxon utilitarianism, and from this point of view, he achieved his goal. Nevertheless, Kant did not fully interpret the commandment of love. In fact, the commandment of love is not limited to excluding all behavior that reduces the person to a mere object of pleasure. It requires more; it requires the *affirmation of the person as a person*.