*Europa Christi*

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Remarks by George Weigel

As we mark the fortieth anniversary of Karol Wojtyła’s election as Bishop of Rome, the democratic project is threatened by external enemies and internal confusions. So let us remember John Paul II’s witness to hope. That hope was not confined to his own Polish nation; it was a hope for all humanity. At the same time, we should remember that John Paul II hoped that the new democracies of central and eastern Europe, having liberated themselves through the power of truth and the power of solidarity, would remind the older members of the democratic family that freedom and truth, freedom and virtue, cannot be separated without doing serious damage to the democratic project.

John Paul II would not be entirely happy with the condition of the world’s democracies today. So perhaps, on this anniversary, it would be helpful to imagine that he is still with us, offering lessons in some basic ideas about democracy in the twenty-first century. Let me propose to you today a *John Paul II Political Lexicon*.

***The Free Society***.

As John Paul II described it in the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, the free society of our time has three interlocking, component parts: a democratic political community, a free or market-centered economy, and a vibrant public moral culture. The public moral culture is the key to all the rest. Political and economic freedom liberate great human energies. What, if not a vibrant moral culture, will direct those energies so that they contribute to human flourishing and social solidarity?

Moral and cultural renewal – “living in the truth,” which helped liberate east central Europe from communism – is thus an essential part of democratic renewal.

***Freedom.***

What is the “freedom” of the free society? In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II stressed that an authentically human freedom is freedom rooted in truth and ordered to goodness.

Throughout the democratic world today, the idea of freedom is being infantilized, as if “I did it my way” exhausted the meaning of liberty. But this is not the freedom that liberated central and eastern Europe from tyranny. The revolution of conscience that sustained the Revolution of 1989 was built on a nobler concept of freedom: once again, freedom tethered to truth and ordered to goodness. The democratic world needs a rebirth of that mature, noble freedom today.

***Europe (or, more broadly, the West).***

Is “Europe,” or “the West,” simply a set of political and economic arrangements? Or is the West a cultural accomplishment, a civilization? In *Ecclesia in Europa*, John Paul II proposed a deeply cultural concept of the West – Europe, and Europe’s former dependencies around the world.

The civilization of the West, he wrote, was born from the fruitful interaction of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome. From Jerusalem, from biblical religion, the West learned that life is adventure and pilgrimage. Thus Israel’s Exodus from Egypt is not just an important spiritual metaphor in the lives of Jews and Christians; it is the foundational image for the Western idea of history. From Athens, from Greek philosophy, the West learned to have faith in reason and in reason’s capacity to grasp the truth, including moral truth. That faith in reason, linked to the biblical idea of creation, explains why science flourished in the West. And from Rome, the West learned that the rule of law is superior to the rule of brute force or raw coercion in human affairs.

Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome are all necessary for the West’s future. A loss of faith in the God of the Bible leads to a loss of faith in reason, and a loss of faith in reason is lethal to democracy. For argument based on reason is the lifeblood of democracy, and when reason dies, so does argument – and the rule of raw power begins.

***Historical Memory***.

In *Memory and Identity*, John Paul II reflected on the importance of historical truth for the democratic future. A true telling of a nation’s story, purified of distortions, leads to an open future. Falsified or distorted history contributes to personal corruption. False history also leads to social decadence and ultimately to tyranny, as the experience of Weimar Germany should have taught the West.

For John Paul II, the truth about a nation’s history was an important part of the vibrant public moral culture that was the key to a flourishing free society in the twenty-first century. From 1945 until 1989, Poland suffered from a false history, invented in service to power detached from truth. Poland, and every other nation, needs a true story. Resisting temptations to rewrite history for partisan political purposes is essential to democratic renewal today.

***Pluralism.***

“Pluralism” is not the mere sociological fact that there are differences of religious and political conviction within every democracy. Genuine pluralism is a truth-based conversation among people of different perspectives, in which all parties seek the common good. The achievement of genuine pluralism is a society’s reply to the word of the Lord conveyed through the prophet Isaiah: “Come, now, let us reason together....” [Isaiah 1.18].

In *Memory and Identity*, John Paul II observed that “fundamental to the Polish spirit...is multiplicity and pluralism, not limitation and closure.” That national characteristic he described as the “Jagiellonian” dimension of the Polish spirit, embodied in the great Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which was, as he wrote, “a Republic embracing many nations, many cultures, many religions.” That historical memory has resonance for an American, the son of a natively diverse land that must always work at pluralism and solidarity. I hope it still has resonance in the Poland of the twenty-first century.

In the Solidarity movement’s ability to join diverse people in a common, noble enterprise, John Paul II saw a great achievement in building pluralism. Solidarity, the movement, embodied solidarity, the virtue and the fourth foundational principle that John Paul cemented into Catholic social doctrine.

***Patriotism.***

John Paul II was a Polish patriot whose Polish and Cracovian roots, experience, and loyalties led him to a broader appreciation of the spiritual unity of the Slavic peoples, and indeed of the cultural unity of Europe. His Polish patriotism was not chauvinistic or xenophobic. As he wrote in *Memory and Identity*,

“...nation and native land, like the family, are permanent realities...[Yet] one thing must be avoided at all costs [--]...an unhealthy nationalism. Of this, the twentieth century has supplied some all too eloquent examples, with disastrous consequences. How can we be delivered from such a danger? I think the right way is through patriotism. Whereas nationalism involves recognizing and pursuing the good of one’s own nation alone, without regard for the rights of others, patriotism....is a love of one’s own native land that accords rights to all other nations equal to those claimed for one’s own. Patriotism, in other words, leads to a properly ordered social love.”

There is a lesson here for today, and for all of us.

***A Public Church.***

As envisioned by John Paul II, the Catholic Church of the twenty-first century was neither an *established* Church nor a *partisan* Church: neither a Church that puts state power behind its truth claims, nor a Church that identifies itself with one political party.

John Paul II’s option for the twenty-first century was a *public* Church: what he called in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* a *proposing* Church. This proposing Church would not be a political actor, in the narrow sense of the term. It would work at a deeper level of public life – the level of cultural self-understanding. The Church would be the guardian of the truths that make it possible to live freedom well.

Pope St. John Paul II was a great theorist of the free society. May we all continue to learn from his teaching and his example.