

## Editorial Note

# Two Magnetic Personalities Bridging the Twentieth and the Twenty-First Centuries

I am privileged to pen this Editorial Note as I introduce this monographic issue of the peer-reviewed journal of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta. Our Faculty, the “mother-Faculty” of the University of Malta, dates back to 1592 when the Jesuits founded the *Collegium Melitense* in Valletta. Later events led to the formal foundation of the University of Malta by Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto, in 1769. This university just celebrated its sestercentennial year.

By means of this monograph, *The Word and the Church*, the Faculty of Theology is honoured to commemorate the centenary of two great Catholic personalities who have left a great impact not only on the Church, but on humanity as a whole – the Slav Pope, John Paul II, and the foundress of the Focolare Movement, Chiara Lubich. It can be affirmed that the respective roles and charismas of the two converged, particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Thirty years ago, prior to the first Apostolic Visit of Pope John Paul II to Malta (25-27 May 1990), I wrote a short article for an in-house Seminary journal which was not a publication in the formal sense of the word. It was distributed among the major seminary students and the four members of staff of the Archbishop’s Seminary, but was not published, that is it was not made available to the public. After a span of thirty years, I can still re-affirm what I wrote then, just a few months after the Fall of the Berlin Wall:

Karol Wojtyła, John Paul II – a magnetic personality revealing a deep and profound strength of mind and spirit. A personality overflowing with warmth and spontaneity. A spontaneity based on a faith akin to granite. A faith deeply

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rooted within the fertile Church of Christ in his native country. A nation which has withstood the test of greedy, land-thirsty invaders. A nation which has withstood the onslaught of atheistic ideology.

The Iron Chancellor once remarked: "Might is right; blood and iron will decide." The Pole has proved that this is not the whole truth. Where repression lusted and where censorship was rife, the Church bloomed with an unimaginable force. Plebiscites may have "rewarded" dictators with a ninety-nine per cent overwhelming result. But notwithstanding their seemingly eternal bid to cling to power, they have all collapsed like a stack of cards. Without exception, they all followed the example set by Humpty-Dumpty who sat on a wall ... and who had a great fall. Walls have risen. Walls have crashed down or crumbled to dust. Long and mighty "curtains" stretching across borders have been removed, never to be hung again. The fresh breeze of liberty has entered. It will never leave. What does all this have to do with our subject?

A man helped to set the ball rolling. He threw the pebble from the mountain top. The pebble gathered ice. It gathered weight. It gathered momentum. Nothing could stop its rapid descent down the mountain side. It passed by, uprooting trees. It was an avalanche which brought a radical change in the landscape.

His is a first-hand experience. He has lived through it all. He has never succumbed. Forced underground in his youth, this did not deter him. Donning the cassock, he embarked on his mission of service to all men. An assistant priest in a parish, pastoral work was his joy. Later on, as university chaplain, he was bent on catechesis. As philosophy professor at the theological faculty, he was the students' companion and a profound mentor. Donning the mitre and grasping the crozier, he came to the forefront. Second only to the primate, he was his close and faithful collaborator.

Firm in his most profound convictions, he was never malleable. He dauntlessly faced the war of nerves waged against him. Never did he retreat an inch. He courageously raised the cross in the "city-without-God" which the State was keen on constructing. He was later to consecrate the church of what was intended to be the first and model atheistic city of his country. But God was there, in that city. God as there and so was his people. His adversaries feared his powerful word and his courageous, unflinching, example.

At ease with diplomatic circles, in close touch with the media at home and abroad, on the par with the finest intellectuals, he is a man close to the people, a man ingrained in the hearts of the masses ... Himself a labourer – in his youth – in a quarry and in a chemical plant, his words will remain engraved in the conscience of the workers. An actor, a poet, a writer, he is a man engaged in

profound reflection. Moreover, he is a man in deep and intimate communion with God. And also profoundly close to Mary.

This is what I wrote when John Paul II's pontificate was in its twelfth year. Today, I can write with the benefit of hindsight, and offer some striking statistical data. The Papal Magisterium of John Paul II fills several shelves in any theology library. The list is impressive: 14 encyclical letters, 14 apostolic exhortations, 11 apostolic constitutions and 45 apostolic letters. His Apostolic Visits to countries in all continents remain etched in the memory of all those who were privileged to be part of them or to follow them by means of the media. During a total of 104 apostolic visits outside Italy, he set foot in 129 nations. He made 3288 speeches during his journeys in Italy and abroad. His visits in different parts of Italy, outside Rome, total 146. He visited 301 parishes in the diocese of Rome, out of a total of 333. Pope John Paul II held 1164 General Audiences, enabling him to meet, on these occasions, an estimated 17,665,800 faithful from all over the world. He convened twenty Synods of Bishops (Ordinary, Extraordinary, Special Assemblies and Particular). As Pope, he ordained 321 bishops. He met an astonishing 1022 Heads of State and Prime Ministers. Besides two Jubilee Years (1983-84 and 2000), he led the Roman Catholic Church in celebrating a Marian Year (1987-1988), a Year of the Family (1994), a Year of the Rosary (2002-2003) and a Year of the Eucharist (2004-2005). He created 231 cardinals in nine consistories. He presided over 147 beatification and 51 canonisation ceremonies. These are but a few statistical data to gauge the impact of John Paul II's pontificate on the Church and the world. It is not easy to offer a general overview of a multifaceted pontificate, and so I invite our readers to appreciate this personal testimony of the life and mission of the Polish Pope expressed by his successor, Pope Benedict XVI during his beatification in 2011. He affirmed that in his collaboration with John Paul II, he was sustained by

his spiritual depth and by the richness of his insights. His example of prayer continually impressed and edified me: he remained deeply united to God even amid the many demands of his ministry. Then too, there was his witness in suffering: the Lord gradually stripped him of everything, yet he remained ever a "rock", as Christ desired. His profound humility, grounded in close union with Christ, enabled him to continue to lead the Church and to give to the world a message which became all the more eloquent as his physical strength declined. In this way he lived out in an extraordinary way the vocation of every priest and bishop to become completely one with Jesus, whom he daily receives and offers in the Church.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Homily during Beatification Mass of the Servant of God John Paul II (1 May 2011): [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20110501\\_beatificazione-gpii.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20110501_beatificazione-gpii.html) (accessed 16 March 2020).

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Countless articles have been written on a plethora of aspects of the pontificate of the Slav Pope – not only from a theological standpoint, but also from a geopolitical point of view. Again, countless dissertations and theses have had John Paul II as their subject. The man Karol Wojtyła – Pope John Paul II – remains one of the most influential personalities bridging the previous and this century. If any proof of this was ever required, his death in April 2005 caused a massive worldwide outpouring of grief, besides an avalanche of tributes from people within the Catholic Church, as well as beyond.

Chiara Lubich (her birthname was Silvia), a lay woman from Northern Italy, who, inspired by Jesus' prayer on the eve of his passion, "May they all be one" (Jn 17:21), created a worldwide movement – the Focolare Movement – transcending religious and cultural differences. It is known that Focolare spirituality has spread to over 350 Churches and Christian Traditions, as well to other religions. On the 7 December 1943, Chiara vowed to live in chastity. She considered this day as the genesis of the Focolare Movement. Some time later, she was joined by four female companions who shared the same house, in Trento, with her, although they had no intention of founding a movement. They only wanted to support each other, humanly and spiritually, in living the Gospel in its radicality. The Focolare Movement was first approved at a diocesan level by the Archbishop of Trento in 1947. Within a few years, the Movement grew as its various branches developed: the first male Focolare in 1948, the branch for priests and members of consecrated life in 1954, and later on, the New Families Movement in 1967, a branch for seminarians in 1968, the Movement for children in 1984 and the Movement for Unity in Politics in 1996.

Several encounters by Chiara over the years were indeed providential for the growth of the Focolare Movement, its spiritual impact and its impetus to the ecumenical movement: names like Igino Giordani (1948), Don Pasquale Foresi (1949), Slovak Bishop Pavel Hnilica (1954), the Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey (1966) and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras (1967). In 1977, Lubich also embarked on contacts with members of other religions, and in 1981 she was invited to Tokyo by the founder of a lay renewal movement within Buddhism, Nikkyo Nirwano, to address thousands of its members.

Pope John Paul II described Chiara Lubich as "a messenger of unity among many brothers and sisters in every corner of the world."<sup>2</sup> The letter written by Pope Benedict XVI and read out at the funeral Mass of Chiara Lubich, in March

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<sup>2</sup> P.J. Clarke, *Lives that made a difference* (Durham: Strategic Book Group, 2011), 217.

2008, offers ample testimony to the enormous impact this lay woman had on the Church in the twentieth century. In the brief message, Pope Benedict offered a concise and precise account of the role played by Chiara:

There are many reasons to give thanks to the Lord for the gift made to the Church by this woman of intrepid faith, a gentle messenger of hope and of peace, foundress of a vast spiritual family that embraces many fields of evangelisation. I would above all like to thank God for the service that Chiara has given to the Church, a silent and incisive service always in harmony with the Church's Magisterium: "The Popes", she used to like to say, "always understand us." And this is so because Chiara and her Work of Mary have always sought to respond with docile fidelity to the appeals and desires of each of them. The continuous link with my Venerable Predecessors, from the Servant of God Pius XII to Blessed John XXIII and the Servants of God Paul VI, John Paul I and John Paul II, was a concrete testimony to this. The thought of the Pope was for her a sure guide. Moreover, looking at the initiatives she accomplished, one could even affirm that she had an almost prophetic capacity to perceive and anticipate it. Her legacy passes now to her spiritual family: may the Virgin Mary, a constant model of reference for Chiara, help each Focolare member to travel the same path, always contributing to make the Church, as was written by beloved John Paul II on the day after the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, more a home and school of communion.<sup>3</sup>

One can trace a convergence of Pope John Paul II's ministry and the spirituality of Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement. This is evident in the ecclesiological convictions embraced by both leaders, as well as in their contribution to ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. The spirituality of communion is another conspicuous area of convergence which binds the two. Brendan Leahy, Bishop of Limerick, and one of the contributors to this issue of *Melita Theologica*, affirms that "the spirituality of communion would be a utopia were it not based on what John Paul called the 'mystery within the mystery' – Jesus Crucified and Forsaken,"<sup>4</sup> a key dimension of the spirituality of Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement.

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Letter to Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone (18 March 2008). [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_let\\_20080318\\_chiara-lubich.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20080318_chiara-lubich.html) (accessed 16 March 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Brendan Leahy, "Promoting the Spirituality of Communion," in Id., *Believe in Love: The Life, Ministry and Teachings of John Paul II* (New York: New City Press, 2011), 55. A postgraduate dissertation on this topic was presented at our Faculty, some years ago: see Anthony P. Fitzpatrick, *Chiara Lubich on a Spirituality of Communion as Promoted in 'Novo millennio ineunte'*, S.Th.L. dissertation, Faculty of Theology, University of Malta, 2013.

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I am indeed privileged to have been entrusted by the Editorial Board of *Melita Theologica* (of which I was an active member for several years) to coordinate this monographic number of the journal, on behalf of the Department of Fundamental and Dogmatic Theology. It has been an arduous, yet academically enriching, experience to collaborate with the seven contributors, two of whom are colleagues at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta. The other contributors are colleagues and friends from other academic institutions in Italy, Belgium, Eire and Argentina. The learned articles focus on some dimensions so close to the hearts and minds of Pope John Paul II and Chiara Lubich, such as ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, scriptural insights on Christian anthropology, the Word of God and the Christian life, and the Marian profile of the Church. The readers of our journal are indeed gifted with a precious selection of profound and scholarly reflections on a number of areas embraced so wholeheartedly by both personalities.

Finally, I express my gratitude to the peer-reviewers of the submitted articles for their wise insights and constructive comments, as well as to the Editor of *Melita Theologica*, my colleague and friend, Rev. Dr Martin Micallef O.F.M.Cap., Ms Carmen Zammit (for her assistance in the final editing tasks), the Editorial Board and the Administrative Board of the journal.

Rev. Prof. Hector Scerri  
Co-Editor of this issue