As we reflect on the life, works, and historical context of the one the Holy Spirit selected in October 1978 to teach, sanctify, and govern the People of God on earth, some observations come to mind about the meaning of his pontificate. I divide them into two groups: factual and interpretive.

**Facts**

These personal characteristics of Karol Wojtyla were particularly relevant—even pivotal:

1. The deep piety instilled into him early and carefully nurtured by his father and those who undertook his spiritual and secular education.
2. The prodigious intellect with which he was endowed—also carefully nurtured by a demanding program of study encouraged by a series of outstanding teachers and loyal friends, together with the disciplines he chose to cultivate (dramatics; philosophy; theology).
3. His indomitable will, steeled in the circumstances of war and enemy occupation.
4. A compassionate heart that went out to the underprivileged and victims of all forms of unjust discrimination.
5. A strong physical constitution well developed by athletics and kept in shape late into life by regular exercise.
6. His creative flair for poetry and drama well developed on the amateur stage.
7. His love of country and church—so closely interconnected in the circumstances of his life—and the related virtues of loyalty and determination developed under trial.
8. His direct and intense experience with abuses of authority, with terror and atrocities, especially in the phenomena connected to 20th century totalitarian ideologies.
9. His divine vocation to the priesthood, carefully prepared, discerned and subsequently nourished by prayer and penance, as well as continued study; his rich pastoral experience as priest and bishop.
10. When these are taken together, they amount to a great potential for leadership, both ecclesiastical and political.
Interpretation

To interpret the ways in which John Paul II actualized his potentiality brings us into the difficult terrain where relevant facts have to be weighed and balanced relative to one another. Such judgments are inevitably influenced—and perhaps decisively—by the interpreter’s own education and experience, and above all by his familiarity with his subject (in this case very extensive as a result of first-hand witness as well as reading and discussion).

A colleague at ISU (historian) suggested that when our era is viewed from a distant historical perspective, the three popes who governed the Church between 1958 and 2005—almost half a century—may be treated as a unit because of the great unifying events of the period: Vatican II and its aftermath in ecclesiastical history and the Cold War and its aftermath in secular history. The very fact that John Paul I chose those two names, and then rather inevitably John Paul II, is significant. Perhaps that period will be called “the evangelical papacy.”

We live at a time in history when popes have found it obligatory (as they had in earlier eras) to involve themselves (and the Church) in world diplomacy. That current involvement had already started in the pontificates of Bl. Pius IX and no pope was more involved than Pius XII, on account of World War II. The availability of mass media of communication and of rapid air travel, of course, developed and rapidly accelerated that involvement. Everything was in place for John Paul II to carry—to a point of saturation—those means of direct contact with uncountable hundreds of millions. Never before have so many in the world’s population been able to establish such an intimate association with a pope—or indeed, with any world leader. (Perhaps it is highly significant that it should have been a pope, rather than a political leader.)

In the days following his death, how many thousands of persons were quoted all over the world as saying they were feeling the loss of a father, a brother, a friend? One would have to conclude that John Paul was in the first place a world-class diplomat, negotiator, facilitator of interpersonal communications; in developing that role so richly he relied, of course, upon his love for drama and his ability as an actor, as well as on his deep formation in the personalist school of Christian philosophy. He managed to help many people realize that the path to holiness is widely accessible, not closed to a privileged few, who withdraw from the world. The large number of beatifications and canonizations was probably motivated, in part, by the same aim.

One word that captures this first point about John Paul’s meaning and significance is the Polish word that sparked the uprising in Poland and in short order disposed of the Communist regimes in eastern Europe—solidarnosz (solidarity). This is one of two key ideas in Christian social doctrine (the other being its complement, subsidiarity). I think John Paul made it the fulcrum not only of his social teaching, but of his zeal to evangelize the world. (And yes, gestures as well as words, were of exceptional importance in the way he went about it.) Solidarity put energy into the way he accepted as a personal charge and dedicated himself to wholeheartedly: “Go forth and teach all nations.”
The motive for evangelization is always love, the love of caritas, and at the heart of “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,” he says that solidarity is just another word for love. For an early Church Father (Fulgentius), “the spiritual building up of Christ’s Body is achieved through love.” John Paul uses the word solidarity to give an important nuance to love, a personalistic one that spoke to the mentality of his times, especially in more ancient societies than ours. John Paul’s over-riding aim was to take the papacy (i.e. Peter) to the people—the way Peter himself had done at the beginning. And Paul even more so. For that he had to break out of the mailed vest of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. And so we come to a matter that has occasioned (in part) this reflection:

It is asked why John Paul did not make so successful a use of his diplomatic skills in running the Church, in a pontiff’s necessary negotiations with higher (and lower) echelons in the Church bureaucracy, and especially with the world’s bishops. Wasn’t there also an internal solidarnosz to apply with equal, if not more diligence? Why did he seem to give priority to worldwide diplomacy in reaching out to people of all nations, of all faiths (and no faith)?

“I answer that” it is because he had such a keen sense of the common good—the context of both solidarity and subsidiarity—and recognized that in the contemporary world the good of the Roman Catholic Church is a part of the good of mankind (the People of God taken in a universal sense); that therefore if he stayed home and served as a kind of domestic administrator of the patrimony of that portion of the People of God of which he was the official head, he would have misplaced his priorities. What most urgently needed to be done was to heal old wounds that have separated people for centuries, for millennia.

According to a well-established principle of social philosophy (where John Paul enjoyed rare command and was free of all ideological taint), whoever would govern with justice looks first to the common good. John Paul must have seen it as clearly providential that the Holy Spirit had chosen one with this grasp of “the big picture,” and with precisely the skills needed to deal with it, to send out to evangelize the whole People of God, the entire Body of Christ, as his Vicar and the successor of Peter. Evidently John Paul thought he had no option but to go out and witness the whole of the Gospel consistently and insistently, unhesitatingly. He saw himself as a Confessor of the Faith in the arena of the world, an Apostle to both Jews and Gentiles, whose complete life had to consist in professing that “Jesus is the Christ.”

To me this means that John Paul understood the concepts “govern” and “government” beyond any narrow, administrative sense. I think he preferred “shepherd” and “shepherding.” He thought (could see) that he was always governing, not just when he was working at a desk and making decisions, but always—everywhere he was, whatever he was saying or doing—but especially when he was “working” a crowd. He was always Peter, always the chief shepherd of Christ’s flock. It was said toward the end that not until the bed of pain had he so effectively governed the Church as he showed the world (certainly his closest collaborators, and let us hope, all of the Cardinals and Bishops of the Church) what it means to give one’s life for one’s friends.
In effect everyone became his friend (in the sense Our Lord meant it), as represented by the people in the square outside the Clinic and outside St. Peter’s. In any case, it is there that God permitted him to complete his service of the Church. He was never indifferent to the government of the Church, as he understood it—the only way he thought it could and should be understood. He was governing by gesture as much as by word, by example as much as by preaching. And (an actor to the end) he was never as persuasive as when he stood before a multitude of young people—even if he couldn’t utter a sound. They understood him best then. Most could remember his perennial greeting: “Jesus Christ LOVES YOU!!” (Hadn’t that old master, Plato said it: If you want to reform the world, forget about the adults and concentrate on youth.)

So let us not say that John Paul neglected his domestic duties or was indifferent to them; there is abundant evidence to the contrary, especially the lengths to which he went in promoting the piety and formation of priests and the amount of time he spent exhorting bishops to think and act like true bishops, reminding them (especially when they, sometimes reluctantly, came to see him ad limina) that they had to be martyrs in the world as it is today; otherwise they are fake bishops!

I think his greatest continuing disappointment was the reluctance, even the unwillingness to go along with him of so many he had appointed to help him teach, sanctify, and govern the particular flocks. Is it not they who bear responsibility for any lost patrimony; is it not they who overlooked the duties of office, who allowed themselves to be intimidated by local resistance. It may be that he could see that when he came on the scene, the patrimony had already been lost (hadn’t Paul VI recognized it?—“the smoke of Satan”). And so he concentrated on what the common good required, for now. A time would come to recover the patrimony, but something more urgent was pressing.

I called that a disappointment because those who should have been his closest friends were the very ones who would not allow him to exercise in their behalf his special gift of speaking to each person in a way that brought out what was deep inside. Perhaps that gift was the fruit of his study of personhood. I believe a future historian, if he is honest, will have to point out the massive disobedience, generally passive but too often active. There must be thousands of instances where the pastors (and their theological advisers) turned away from following his lead and even obstructed his path. The world’s seminaries remained seedbeds not of loyal followers but of sophistical traitors.

Here is another reason John Paul emphasized his diplomatic role. Was it not directed in the first instance at his fellow Catholics dispersed throughout the world so that he might reach them over the intractable resistance of so many false shepherds and the disaffected persons they selected (or retained) to run the local Church and to teach future priests and what should have been a well-educated laity. He knew that he was—and had to be—a “sign of contradiction” to them. For he was following Paul’s advice to “do the truth in charity,” and maximum respect for freedom, even at the cost of unity.

Another factor I think has to be taken into account in explaining the priority John Paul gave to the common good of the world community (which in
his mind was equivalent to God’s People) is connected to Pope Leo XIII’s horrifying vision of what Satan was going to be permitted to do to the world in the 20th century. I think John Paul read the Fatima apparitions as a logical extension of that vision, and then must have seen the assassination attempt on their anniversary as a confirmation of Fatima (he already knew that “third secret,” of course, before it was disclosed near the end of his life).

I conclude that this made John Paul II an “apocalyptic” pope in a way that went beyond the diplomacy and the way he governed the Church—and placed him in a different context from John XXIII and Paul VI. The mystical intervention into world history by the Lord and his Mother—and the Serpent—requires John Paul’s pontificate to be viewed in a transcendent perspective. I think he saw in that light how supremely urgent it was for him to accept the “special assignment” that came to him within the papal office as an important dimension of his mission. As he had pledged to be “totus tuus” there was no way he could not see that mission (it came through Mary) as encapsulating his pontificate. I would say that he read every other aspect of it in that light.

It seems that in his long periods of nocturnal prayer, and even as he meditated on the mysteries of the Rosary, he was habitually guided by a superior Wisdom without which he could not fulfill that mission. Those contemplative (mystical?) flights carried him beyond the mundane, and even beyond the ordinary confines of his office as Roman Pontiff to the great battle between Michael and Satan in which he saw himself implicated in a unique way. Those “wiles and snares of the devil” the whole Church used to pray to be delivered from at the end of Mass (and a few of us still do) have had such a stranglehold on the world for nigh onto a century: Can it be said that they were about to meet their match? About to face a decisive test? Ronald Reagan had identified the USSR as “the evil empire,” but he could only see part of it.

John Paul felt obligated to fit all other business of the papacy—its normal, or “peacetime” responsibilities—into that strategic picture in order to discern their right proportions. Who is to control the world in the new millennium is at stake. John Paul seemed to realize from the beginning that victory would entail his martyrdom, that his vocation was to be a martyr before the world, to give his life “as a ransom for the many” drawing as close as possible to Jesus in the meantime. Some Muslims seemed to realize what was afoot, that the Holy Spirit was mounting (or resuming) a crusade—maybe even that final battle Mary seemed to look toward at Fatima—that “era of peace” to be granted the world once enough prayer and penance had been offered for “the conversion of Russia.” (I won’t even venture to interpret the meaning of that!)

So a more complete picture emerges from these brushstrokes: a world diplomat-actor in the service of the Divine Mercy and His Mother (he dies on the first feast and has his life “restored” on the second) in a struggle orchestrated in heaven; and as a consequence, an evangelical pope, a missionary pope, a pilgrim pope, a witness pope, a reconciling pope, but also an apocalyptic pope, a mystical pope, a martyr pope. When he introduced (following St. Faustina) the Divine Mercy 3 years ago he said: “The message of
Christ’s merciful love needs to resound forcefully anew….The hour has come to bring Christ’s message to everyone….The message of Divine Mercy is able to fill hearts with hope and to become the spark of a new civilization—the civilization of love” (Paul VI’s term).

All concerns having to do with the patrimony of Peter are subsumed within those roles and cared for as a function of them. For the nitty gritty of papal administration, John Paul had necessarily to rely on collaborators up close and dispersed throughout the world, few of whom understood what he was about and therefore could be faithful allies (one is surely Ratzinger), most of whom were unwilling because uncomprehending collaborators. Perhaps they should not be faulted, for it was not given to them to share his vision. Like Christ, he respected their freedom and exhibited heroic restraint in refusing to interfere with what God was permitting. (He took himself seriously when he cried out, “an education in freedom is urgently needed today.”)

Mindful not only of his contemporaries but perhaps even more for his beloved young people when they should be ready to understand them, he exhausted himself pouring out magisterial documents, carefully preparing thousands of messages to be delivered at home and all over the world, in a way not seen since the time of the early Fathers. In this, too, he was the martyr shepherd, for he realized (as Christ had in the Garden) that even most of his apostles and disciples no longer followed him. I pray that his successor will put the Church on a program of disseminating and studying that patrimony; along with the Catechism, it could be subject matter enough for two decades of prayer and digestion by the whole Church.

It remains to be seen if that successor can say of the apocalyptic struggle, with St. Thomas More, “the field is won.” Mary’s man has gained a victory, not just for the Church, but for mankind, but it remains to be seen whether it was “the” victory our Mother spoke of. In any case, I think it very unlikely that we now need another John Paul in a still higher key.

**Conclusion**

But who can dare venture to “interpret” this mystical figure? Let it be clear in conclusion, that my purpose has not been a vindication nor a defense, but an attempt to discern how John Paul himself understood what he was doing and why. Certainly he would want us to see and pardon many defects, many imperfections, many indiscretions. (Although they may not be the ones we are thinking of.) This has simply been an attempt to open ourselves—as to the mystery of the Eucharist—so to the mystery of the Church, and to the mystery of the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

**Appended Notes from Letters**

In the days immediately following the death of John Paul II, between 20 and 30 letters arrived from former ISU colleagues and students who knew that I had been (at least in their estimate) close to him. What follows are some excerpts that reflect a widespread consensus concerning the ultimate meaning of his pontificate. Some echo what I have tried to say. They are composed by
persons in the Buddhist tradition, Evangelical Protestants, Baptists, Lutherans, and several Catholics; in law, civil service, foreign service, business; half are secondary and college teachers.

“The greatest lesson Pope John Paul II taught us all is simply how he lived his life. He preached the words of Jesus Christ but more importantly lived those words through love and compassion for his fellow human beings.... Every person regardless of religion or race should keep that legacy of Pope John Paul II and Jesus Christ alive.”

“Church leaders are not here to win popularity contests, so he has given me a lot to think about.”

“Pope John Paul has been a tremendous influence on my thought and given me a vision of the world. I will always remember how he forgave the would-be assassin. He showed the Christ-like compassion we should all strive for—to meet violence and oppression with love and forgiveness....Pope John Paul's journey home to Christ leaves us all with the mission to make someone’s life a little better, to use our knowledge to help make the world better. I feel very blessed to have witnessed the role he played in world events while retaining his humanity and compassion.”

“All you need to be is a human being to recognize a great soul.”

“He was an extraordinary pope, in part because he was an incredible human being: intelligent, caring, charismatic.”

“He had a contagious zest for life and with gusto carried out his vocation. It is altogether fitting that he liked the movie, ‘Life Is Beautiful.’ His life exemplified that truth.”

“To me his greatness showed in the way he energized my personal search for THE TRUTH, which I found in the Catholic Church....In his respect for the preciousness of all human life, he attempted to bring Christ’s peace to all people—the only way World Peace can be attained.”

“It constantly amazed me how he could speak so forcefully about the divinity of Jesus Christ—as the answer to all the world’s challenges.”

“We are discussing in class the Pope’s ministry of Life and Truth.”

“The effect of the pope’s death on the people here [Russia] shows the effect one man can have on the world. His life and his efforts gave everyone a little hope. That is a priceless gift that will continue to exist in the minds and hearts of millions for many years.”
“The time has arrived for the Pope to rest and his will be forever peaceful....I know I will miss him, like so many others.”

“I, too, feel like I have lost a friend. But he is in a better place to help us now than when he was here on earth.”

“I had forgotten how great his impact was on those of us Sons of the Church who had walked too far arm in arm with the world.... We know that we’re closer to him now than ever and that we’re even more capable of carrying out the tasks he reminded us of when he was young. He’s young again and strong, and his voice is that much more eloquent as we read his words again, newer than before.”

POPE JOHN PAUL II’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGY
A Presentation at Shellbourne Conference Center, July 4, 2007
by John Gueguen

PROLOGUE

Catholic theology in the twentieth century followed two distinct but compatible paths. The predominant path followed the line of Augustine, Anselm, Bonaventure, and Scotus, with its roots in Scripture and the Fathers of the Church. Emphasis was placed on theology as reflection on the mystery of God (the Trinity), the history of salvation, and the sacramental life of grace. Significant among these theologians was the Tübingen school in Germany, one of whose members was Josef Ratzinger. The second path followed the line of Aquinas as enriched by later developments in philosophy and theology, especially modern personalism; it emphasized man’s place in history, in the world. The leading school was in Poland at Lublin. Both ways of conducting theological reflection recognized the centrality of love, expressing it in distinct but related ways. In the former, love finds its perfection in communio—persons gathered in community life. For the second, love is more of a personal experience that reaches its fulfillment when persons are associated in solidarity.

Among those who pioneered the second path was Cardinal Karol Wojtyła—Pope John Paul II. His theology springs from the fountain of philosophy, especially philosophical anthropology and ethics. His Christian theology would be incomplete without a Christian anthropology; a Christian moral philosophy underlies his Christian moral theology. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of John Paul’s theology is its synthesis of the Thomistic tradition (the human being’s metaphysical foundation in nature) with Carmelite spirituality (John of the Cross) and modern phenomenology (the human being’s experience as person). One might say that the substance of John Paul’s
theology is Thomism, and its method phenomenological (cf Fides et Ratio, 59, 78, 83).

The importance he gave to theological discourse was highlighted in his address at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow on the 600th anniversary of its theology faculty (June 1997): Theology provides the transcendent reference points for service of the human good. The truth about man depends on the truth about God. Theology fosters “a lively awareness...that man does not create truth; rather, truth discloses itself to man” as veritatis splendor.

Hence the primary task of theology is to see, clarify, and proclaim those two truths, especially the truth about Jesus Christ (redemptor hominis), who is both God and man: “Jesus Christ is the only Gospel; we have nothing more to say, no other witness to bear” (Evangelium Vitae, 95). The deepest truth about God and about human salvation is manifested to us—and to everyone—in Jesus Christ through His words and deeds (Vatican II, Dei Verbum; cf Fides et Ratio, 10). Through Jesus Christ we have access to the Father in the Holy Spirit. In this way, theology equips man to attain the ultimate end of his life, contemplation of the triune God. It is in existential experience that a man develops his own ascetical and mystical theology, not in a classroom.

An element of hope is always present in John Paul’s theology (cf Crossing the Threshold of Hope). Even before his election, he was conscious of the need to re-found theology after decades of confusion in the latter half of the century had led to great losses among clergy and faithful. Thus his first task was to show that theology can be re-founded by means of re-evangelization, first of the teachers of doctrine and then, of the body of the faithful. Dramatizing his conviction that mankind can be brought face to face with Christ, he took seriously his mission as Vicar of that same Jesus Christ by traveling across the earth for a quarter of a century, himself “opening the doors” to Christ’s message for millions of persons of all races and creeds.

A final distinctive element of John Paul’s theology is the veneration of Mary, the Mother of God, St. Joseph, and the multitude of saints he raised to the altar from all walks of life as examples and intercessors before God, but primarily as testimony that, as the Vatican council had proclaimed, all persons are indeed called to heroic holiness. The way his own life closed—in silent suffering—was an eloquent example of this ideal.

PART ONE – HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE TRUTHS OF THE FAITH

In Section 7-B of Fides et Ratio John Paul outlines “the current tasks for theology”—and therefore, for philosophy as well: 1) to renew theological methods for a more effective service of evangelization (as called for by Vatican II); 2) to learn and express once again the revealed truth about God and His plan of salvation in Jesus Christ (the mysterium Christi), always under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The chief purpose of theology, he goes on, is to understand God’s self-revelation in selfless love—his kenosis [self-emptying]—so as to better contemplate the mysteries of the Faith set forth in the Creed.
With the aid of philosophy, this requires careful analysis of the texts of Scripture and Tradition and the solution of three hermeneutical (interpretive) problems that recently emerged: 1) the relation between the meaning of the texts (God’s language embodied within the limits of human discourse) and the truths they communicate; 2) reconciliation of revealed truths (unchanging and universal) with their historical and cultural contexts (contingent and circumstantial); 3) the enduring value of the conceptual language used in authoritative documents across a range of cultures, since the universal propositions of the Faith express truths intelligible by all particular cultures.

This section of *Fides et Ratio* concludes with several applications: 1) to *dogmatic theology*—to be carried out within the Christian metaphysical tradition, not in merely functional (reductive, superficial) terms; 2) to *moral theology*—to form judgments of conscience according to the universal standard of goodness rooted in the Word of God, not according to an individualist ethic independent of that norm; 3) to *fundamental theology (catechesis)*—to proclaim the Faith and form persons to live it in practice.

**PART TWO – HOW TO COMMUNICATE THE TRUTHS OF THE FAITH**

A year after his election, John Paul promulgated his first apostolic exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae* (Oct. 1979), whose aim was to secure the Church’s mission to make disciples of all nations by educating and instructing them. It may be said that his entire pontificate was one continual catechesis—both at St. Peter’s, where in ten years of Wednesday audiences one series of catechetical lessons on the Creed followed another, and during his more than a hundred apostolic trips abroad. Between 1984 and 1994 he treated God the Father and Creator; Jesus Christ, God and Man, and His Redemptive Mission; the Holy Spirit; The Church; Mary, the Mother of God. These lessons, popular versions of the great encyclicals on those subjects, were repeated more briefly in the years leading up to the bi-millennium (1997-2000).

But it was before the multitudes around the world that this fundamental element of John Paul’s theology reached its zenith and expressed his way of practicing ecumenism. He interpreted his mission as Christ’s Vicar on earth as a mandate to “go forth and teach the Gospel to all nations”—and even in their own languages. In this sense, John Paul’s catechesis was “a new Pentecost,” where “each heard him in his own tongue.” His messages were addressed to all: to bishops, priests (especially his Holy Thursday letters), religious, and the laity. Among them, women, professors, workers, artists, and others were given special attention (including the leaders of other religions). But it was the youth of the world who were the Pope’s most favored audience—on the apostolic journeys and in the series of World Youth Days he inaugurated in 1989.

The grand culmination of John Paul’s catechesis was his promulgation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which he regarded as the “last stone” of Vatican Council II. Like his messages in St. Peter’s and around the world, it had a single aim: the re-evangelization of the Church as the necessary first step
in putting people in communion with Jesus (cf Catechesi Tradendae, 15). It was meant to serve as the fundamental text for teaching the Church of the future in the “new springtime” he anticipated.

**PART THREE – HOW TO LIVE THE TRUTHS OF THE FAITH**

This third component of John Paul’s theology consisted of practical applications of the moral theology of the Church. In addition to promulgating a revision of the Code of Canon Law for both Western and Eastern Churches (1983), he focused on two specific subjects: the theology of the body and the social doctrine of the Church.

The importance John Paul gave to clarifying the **theology of marriage and celibacy**—so controverted by the time he became Pope and so often the cause of disobedience among the laity and even the clergy—appears in his decision to devote his first series of Wednesday audiences to this topic. Between 1979 and 1984 he delivered 130 fifteen-minute discourses—highly compact theological and philosophical meditations—to the Original Unity of Man and Woman, the Beatitude about Purity of Heart, the Theology of Marriage and Celibacy, and Reflections on *Humanae Vitae*. Many regard this “theology of the body” as John Paul’s most original contribution to the history of theology (cf George Weigel, who presents a six-page digest in *Witness to Hope*). It remains the subject of numerous studies (lectures, tapes, books).

John Paul regarded the Church’s **social doctrine** as the true “theology of liberation,” another subject that was distorted and manipulated during his pontificate, especially in Latin America. Beginning in 1981 with *Laborem Exercens* and extending through three more major encyclicals and apostolic exhortations to *Centessimus Annus* ten years later, John Paul charted the contemporary Church’s social path—the most important contribution since Pope Leo XIII began to enunciate the Church’s social theology in 1891.

These themes were also treated in virtually all of the Pope’s other encyclicals, especially those on the Holy Trinity. In his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, for example, he said that the fundamental task of the Church—to help each person find Christ and accompany Him through life—requires a dialogue with all people of good will about the threat of uncontrolled progress in the objective demands of the moral order: Ethics must have priority over technology, the spirit over matter, and persons over things.

Next, in *Dives et Misericordia*, he emphasized the Church’s mission to make the modern world more human by introducing into society the love that is more powerful than sin and the reconciliation that is its fruit: the Church, he said, considers it one of her principal duties to proclaim the mystery of mercy revealed by Christ to all humanity, not just the community of believers.

Finally, in *Dominum et Vivificantem*, John Paul found the close of the second millennium a fitting time to remind the world that Christ has overcome
death and continues to breathe upon us His life-giving Spirit in response to a new plea that rises from a materialistic civilization and its culture of death.

The thousands of pages and hours of preaching (including addresses to diplomats at the United Nations and in many countries) John Paul devoted to social teaching show that he was a theologian of praxis more than of theoria. This is because he found the Church and the world “in ruins” and in need more of therapy than of scholarship. As he said in Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, the Church seeks to understand the situation of the world more deeply in the hope of supporting human efforts to improve it with her characteristic religious and human inspiration. It is Jesus Himself, the Pope wrote, who comes to question us about the human tragedies we behold all around us. Reawakening the religious awareness of individuals and peoples will help to promote solidarity and the peace that is its work.

In this way John Paul sought to introduce a new model of human unity beyond nature and culture, a new moral and theological (Trinitarian) criterion for interpreting the world. The Church’s moral theology, he said, aims to provide guidelines for Christian behavior in the world by interpreting national and international realities in light of the Gospel. Not only does the Church proclaim the truth about Jesus, about herself, and about man; she goes on to apply that truth to specific situations by means of the social doctrine. This is primarily the task of lay people, he explained in Christifideles Laici, according to the circumstances of time and place, primarily as service to persons in need.

**EPILOGUE**

From the day he spoke his first words as Roman Pontiff—“Be not afraid; open the doors to Christ!”—until the moment he expired on the Vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday 26 years later, John Paul was conscious of being Jesus Christ to the Church and to the world. His identification with Christ was not just the “official,” magisterial one of “Peter,” but a highly personal and intense relationship. Even before his election to the See of Peter, Karol Wojtyła was a living theology of Christ the Savior in His threefold office of King, Prophet, and Priest.

He exercised the authority of Christ as priest, bishop, and pope (even against the forces of totalitarian despotism). He was at all times Christ the Teacher (even against the entrenched skepticism of the academy), especially as he repeated so often the phrase from Gaudium et Spes: “Jesus Christ fully explains man to man himself.” And he was given the grace to exercise the Priesthood of Christ in all its manifestations, concluding (as Suffering Servant) as a sacrificial victim, offering his own body as a seal upon the theology of Christ he had lived since his baptism.

The short answer to the question, “What was John Paul II’s contribution to the history of theology?” is: *himself.*
THE MAGISTERIUM OF JOHN PAUL II ON CATHOLIC SOCIAL DOCTRINE

The fundamental task of the Church is to help each man find Christ and accompany Him through life. Each man writes the personal history of his soul and is linked socially with all other men. Christians must especially be sensitive to the problem of man, asking the essential questions about his situation now and in the future: Is man progressing or regressing? Does good prevail or evil? Is there a growing social love or selfishness and the propensity to exploit material progress in the interest of dominating others? The Church must carry on a dialogue with all people of good will about the threat of uncontrolled progress and the objective demands of the moral order. Since man is called to share in Christ's kingly function, ethics must have priority over technology, the spirit over matter, and persons over things. What is in question is the advancement of persons, not the multiplication of things; not having more, but being more. To ignore this question increases the danger that humanity will be subjected to greater manipulation by the demands of organization, production, and communication until it becomes the slave of things. Solicitude for man is the root of the problem of a materialistic civilization. Hence the duty to constantly appraise and revise social programs and regimes by reference to...the common good of persons in the community. -- Redemptor Hominis (1979), 13-17

The contemporary reawakening of the sense of justice is proof of the ethical character of the tensions and struggles pervading the world. The Church shares the prevalent desire for a just life and examines what sort of justice social life demands. Her social doctrine, greatly expanded in the past hundred years, provides for the education and formation of consciences in the spirit of justice, and promotes undertakings especially by lay people. It is impossible [however] to establish a bond uniting persons if mutual relationships are regulated solely according to justice. It is precisely the mission of the Church in the modern world to transform the criterion [of just retribution] so as to make the world more human. That can happen only when forgiveness introduces into society the love that is more powerful than sin and the reconciliation which is its fruit. Hence the Church considers one of her principal duties the proclamation of the mystery of mercy revealed by Christ, not only to the community of believers but to all humanity. -- Dives in Misericordia (1980), 12, 14

Human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of man’s good. For this reason, there must be continued study of the subject of work and the worker’s living conditions. In order to achieve social justice in the various parts of the world...there is a need for ever new movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers. We are still living in the modern period whose
special problems for man Leo XIII first called attention to a hundred years ago. Our industrial age introduces new forms of social conflict which have been politicized and brought into ideological confrontation between individualism and collectivism.... The Church teaches the priority of people over things, of labor over capital, because people belong to a higher order of creation. ...Thus the rights of workers are more important than the rights to things. -- Laborem Exercens (1981), 3, 8, 11, 12, 15

The striking phenomenon of contemporary civilization is a potentially tragic collision between the desires against the Spirit and the desires against the flesh. This external aspect of the resistance to the Holy Spirit calls for a new advent, a renewed emphasis upon the desires of the Spirit, lest the values and aims of anti-religious materialism lead to fresh defeats for humanity. Contemporary civilization also gives increasing evidence of signs and symptoms of death whose roots are not only economical, sociological, and historical, but are above all ethical; they represent another fruit of the flesh and the acceptance by materialist philosophy of death as the end of human existence. It is time for a fresh reminder, here at the close of the second millennium, that Christ has overcome death and continues to breathe upon us His life-giving Spirit in response to a new plea that rises more or less consciously from the dark shadows of a materialistic civilization. -- Dominum et Vivificantem (1986), 56, 57

The Church seeks to understand the situation in the world more deeply, in the hope of supporting human efforts to improve it with her characteristic religious and human inspiration.... It is Jesus Himself who comes to question us about the human tragedies we behold in the world, the intolerable burden of poverty and hopelessness.... A divided world like ours must be subject to sinful structures that work against true awareness of the universal common good.... Sinful structures are always rooted in personal sin because they are linked to the concrete acts of free individuals. People seldom think of the world situation today in terms of sin. Yet it is in reality at the root of the evils that afflict us.... To disobey God’s commandments is to offend Him as well as one’s neighbor and to introduce into the world influences that go far beyond the individual. This must be taken into account when evaluating the development of peoples....

Reawakening the religious awareness of individuals and peoples will help to promote solidarity and overcome the danger of war and its causes. Solidarity is thus the path to peace as well as to development. Peace is inconceivable unless world leaders recognize that inter-dependence demands abandonment of policies based on blocs, imperialism, and mutual distrust. The motto of the present pontificate could be phrased as OPUS SOLIDARITATIS PAX: Peace is the fruit of solidarity.... Solidarity is itself a Christian virtue, a part of charity, and its proper act is collaboration. It also expresses itself in total self-giving, forgiveness, and reconciliation.... Solidarity makes us ready for sacrifice, even to the point of laying down our lives for others. Solidarity provides a new model of the unity of the human race beyond the bonds of
nature. It is a new moral and theological (Trinitarian) criterion for interpreting the world.

In proclaiming the truth about Jesus Christ, about herself, and about man, and in applying that truth to specific situations, the Church makes use of her social doctrine. She never proposes technical solutions, economic and political systems or programs, nor does she prefer one over another (provided that they respect human dignity and leave her free to exercise her ministry). The doctrine of the Church is not ideology, but moral theology. It aims to provide guidelines for Christian behavior in the world by interpreting national and international realities in light of the Gospel. Hence this encyclical does not pretend to solve the problem of under-development. But as an expert in humanity, the Church can and does extend her religious mission to various fields of human enterprise that seek the relative happiness that is possible in this world and respect the dignity of persons.

Today the Church’s social doctrine is more open to an international outlook. In re-examining guidelines the Magisterium has taken up in recent decades, one theme that particularly stands out is the option or preferential love for the poor, a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity which applies to our social responsibilities and to decisions we make concerning the ownership and use of goods. Today this option must inspire us to embrace the multitudes of people in need of food, homes, medical attention, hope for a better future, and the fundamental human rights to religious freedom and economic initiative. In this respect, the Christian social doctrine is a reminder that the goods of this world are originally meant for all and that the right of private property does not nullify that original intention since private property has an intrinsically public or social function.

The Church strongly affirms the possibility of overcoming the obstacles to development, and expresses her confidence in a true liberation based on her awareness of the divine promise that history is open to the Kingdom of God. These temporal efforts to make people’s lives more human are never in vain. But temporal achievements are not to be identified with the Kingdom of God, which is present now only in mystery; they only reflect by anticipation that glory which we await at the end of history. -- *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), 12, 13, 36, 39-42, 47, 48

A mending of the Christian social fabric is urgently needed everywhere, and in preparation for it, a remaking of the ecclesial community in each country. In this task the lay faithful have the particular responsibility of showing how the Christian Faith is the only fully valid response to life’s problems and hopes. This requires them to integrate the Gospel with their daily lives. Do not be afraid; open wide to Christ the doors of political and economic systems, culture, civilization, and development.... Each Christian must proclaim God’s love for humankind in a re-evangelization of individuals and of whole populations.... The Church opens up the whole truth about each person and his destiny and seeks to make the family of man more human.
The central task of the Church and her lay faithful is to rediscover the dignity of every human person and to get others to rediscover it. The human person is the center and summit of all things on earth and transcends the whole material world. Personal dignity is the foundation of human equality. All forms of discrimination are totally unacceptable and constitute intolerable injustice, especially those most common today: racial, economic, social, cultural, political, geographical. Recognition of personal dignity leads to respect for personal rights, their defense and promotion. Since they are inherent, universal and inviolable, no authority can eliminate or even change these rights. The inviolability of human life in all stages of its development from conception to natural death, and in every condition of health and well-being, is primary because it reflects the life of God who is the source of human rights. The Church never yields to the violations of the right to life which continue to occur.

Society reveals its whole truth as a community of persons. The lay faithful’s apostolic duty in the temporal order is to be understood as service to persons, first expressed in marriage and family life. This duty to society can be fulfilled only with the conviction of the family’s unique and irreplaceable value in social and ecclesial development. As the basic cell of society, the family must receive primary concern in a time when egoism and its derivatives threaten to dry up the springs of life, and when ideologically inspired social systems try to usurp the family’s role in education. A vast cultural, economic, and legislative effort is needed in order to safeguard the family’s role in humanizing persons and society. This duty falls above all on lay people, who must obtain from public authority the respect and support family rights need in fulfilling that role. Saving the family will save society itself. -- Christifideles Laici (1988), 34, 36-38, 40

This encyclical has looked at the past, but above all it is directed to the future. Like Rerum Novarum, it comes almost at the threshold of a new century, and its intention, with God’s help, is to prepare for that moment. -- Centesimus Annus (1991), 62

This service of the Church is directed to every man, to all mankind, to individuals and to communities. These norms represent the unshakable foundation of a just and peaceful human coexistence, and the equality of rights and duties. By protecting the inviolable personal dignity of every human being, moral norms help preserve the social fabric and its proper development. The fundamental moral rules of social life entail specific demands to which both public authorities and citizens must adhere. Only by acknowledging norms that are valid always and for all, can the ethical foundation of social coexistence be guaranteed, both on the national and the international level. There is...a more widespread sense of the need for radical personal and social renewal. Such a renewal will require enormous effort, given the injustices present in the world today. Only upon the truth about God and the truth about man is it possible to construct a renewed society. Here is where the
Church’s social teaching comes in with its presentation of commandments governing general attitudes and specific actions in social, economic, and political life. -- *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), 96-99

In our present social context...it is necessary to develop a deep critical sense, capable of discerning true values and needs.... All together, we must build a new **culture of life**. This need for cultural transformation is linked both to the present historical situation and to the Church’s perennial mission of evangelization. The Gospel is meant to permeate all cultures from within, like yeast in dough, so that they may express the full truth about the human person and human life.... The presence of lights and shadows in today’s situation ought to make us fully aware that we face an enormous clash between good and evil, death and life, with their corresponding “cultures.” We find ourselves in the midst of this conflict; all are involved and share in it.... With the light and strength of faith in Christ, the Church faces the challenges of the present situation, increasingly more aware of the grace and responsibility she receives from her Lord to proclaim, celebrate, and serve the Gospel of Life.... Jesus is the only Gospel; we have nothing more to say, no other witness to bear. To proclaim Jesus is to proclaim life, for He is the Word of Life.... All of this involves a patient and fearless work of education [and] promotion of vocations to service, particularly among the young. -- *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), 95, 28, 80, 88

---Paraphrase excerpts by John Gueguen

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**CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND SOME CURRENT APPLICATIONS**

“The Magisterium of the Church will never sufficiently insist on presenting and recommending the solution of the great problems of freedom, justice, peace, development; and Catholic laity will never fight sufficiently to solve these problems.”

(Pope John Paul I, 20 September 1978)

I -- **Some General Questions**

1. *Why does the Church teach about social life, institutions, issues?*
   As a **Mother**, the Church has both a right and a duty to instruct her children. She teaches about these matters because her children are **human beings** who live and act in **this world** as they pass through on the way to eternal life; she addresses temporal issues from a transcendent perspective.

2. *What does she teach about these matters?*
   She applies common knowledge of the **natural moral law**, as enlightened by divine revelation (the Gospel and Tradition), to every aspect and at every level of social life. From this she proposes permanent general **principles** to serve as guidelines in the conduct of life throughout the world in every historical period.
3. **What are these principles?**

They may be summarized as follows: Human beings are **social by nature**. The fundamental unit of society is **the family**. The goal of society is the **common good**. Every society is organized both horizontally (**community; solidarity**) and vertically (**authority; subsidiarity**). There is a set of **natural rights** which belong to every human person.

4. **Where can these principles be found?**

The Church makes them explicit, frequently re-states, develops, and clarifies them in the course of exercising her teaching office (**magisterium**), the prophetic office she received from Jesus Christ—who is THE Son, Teacher, Healer, Worker, Suffering Servant, Just Man, Poor Man, Law-giver, Judge, King, and Savior of all. The principal sources are Papal and Conciliar documents, and those of the Sacred Congregations and other offices of the Holy See. Besides Sacred Scripture, these documents also draw on the rich treasury of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and of the writings of the saints.

5. **How do these principles compare with current thought and practice?**

One of the principal missions of Catholic social teaching is to distinguish itself from every current of thought and conduct which conflicts with the natural and supernatural ends of human beings and the well-being of persons and communities. In recent times the magisterium has been especially concerned to point out the errors in extreme forms of collectivism (Marxism) and individualism (Liberalism), of moral relativism, secular humanism, varieties of materialism, unjust discrimination and the oppression of minorities.

6. **How does all of this concern us as well-educated Catholics?**

The magisterium constantly challenges everyone, especially **lay people**, to assume leadership in the Church’s ongoing effort to humanize and evangelize (or re-evangelize) society by giving a Christian orientation to the home, the school, the marketplace, the halls of government, and all the professions. Foremost, this is a task of education through the communications media and all the instruments civil society makes available.

### II -- Some Specific Issues

1. When the great revival of magisterial attention to social issues began with Pope Leo XIII in the late nineteenth century, the burning issue was called “**the social question**.” It was concerned with the baneful consequences of unbridled capitalism in the industrial revolution with respect to laborers and their families.

2. The **worker** and the workplace, the regulation of **property** ownership and use, the gap between **wealth and poverty** are still important issues today, but the context has changed to the uneven economic and technological development of the world.

3. The **family**, too, is still a major--and increasing--concern of the Church, as well as the impact of public policy on the related issues of **marriage** and **education**, and on the universal and inalienable **right to life** from conception to natural death.

4. The role of the **state** (meaning government agencies) in dealing with the social question continues to be a recurring theme; it has been broadened to
embrace the rights and duties of citizens and international cooperation. Particular emphasis has been given to the reduction of the increasingly deadly weapons of war and the promotion of peace.

5. Finally, there has been increasing attention given to the general area of social justice, the punishment of crime, and ways to insure respect for the dignity of the person.

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