

## Personalist anthropology of John Paul II: the dynamics of self-giving and its potential obstacles



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### **Self-giving according to John Paul II and its possible obstacles**

#### **Neither dualism ...**

The Western scientific world is imbued with a dualism that is rooted in two levels in its history. First Greek thought with Plato who considered the body as a prison for the soul, even as the grave. It is then to free the soul from the body to rise to the contemplation of the world of ideas. The result is a pessimistic view of the body with a devaluation of it.

In France this dualism increased further with Descartes and his famous “cogito ergo sum”: the body is then considered as a machine related to matter (*existensa res*) and the soul with mental activity (*congitans res*); one and the other being thus completely dissociated. The result is a mechanistic view of the body and a vitalism that considers the vital phenomenon as an organization of material elements according to mechanical, and physico-chemical laws.

The body is relegated to the biological world and only the mental identity would constitute the person. The body is found on the side of the object and the spirit on the side of reflection. This vision has ethical implications because only those who have a self-awareness and a capacity of discernment would be considered as persons.

#### **... nor monism**

Materialist monism asserts that the only substance is the body and the mind a set of functions. In this conception of monism, man would be considered turned in on himself. So he should be explained only at the level of its human needs

#### **Corporeality**

The contemporary personalist philosophical thought presents the concept of corporeity which avoids both pitfalls. The human person is presented as consisting of a body animated by a soul endowed with intelligence, or to put it another way a body animated by a rational and proper soul. Corporeity indicates human subjectivity in the bodily condition that constitutes the personal identity.

The body is then expression and ability to technological changes of the world and matter. By a cultural mediation the body operates the realization of the person. The body is intentional since it is implicated in the cognitive and emotional process. No spiritual faculty of man (abstraction, responsibility, artistic ability) is expressed without the mediation of the body.

The body is ability of language, expressiveness, epiphany, phenomenology of “I”. The body is the principle and sign of individual differentiation: man, woman, each person, individual otherness, are defined as such by the body.

Man is bodily intelligence, embodied spirit. If the organism is a characteristic of animals, on the other hand man is characterized by corporeity. Emmanuel Mounier speaks of an incorporated existence: "Man is a body just as he is spirit, entirely "body" and entirely "spirit"

- Physical life, organic of the human subject is the foundation of all his development;
- It is the physical existence that makes possible all the rest of human development;
- The spiritual being in man needs a body to exist;
- The first offense that can be done to a person is to suppress its physical dimension;
- By this suppression, all the rest of its development and rights is suppressed.

"Since man is an incarnated spirit, that is to say a soul which expresses himself in a body and a body animated by an immortal spirit, he is called to love in his unified totality. Love embraces also the human body and the body is made participant of spiritual love. "

John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (FC) Téquì, Paris 2011, No. 11.

Every man is a whole; body and spirit that form a whole in unity. Man has his own value from his conception to natural death. Ontologically, children and adults have the same value.

Personalism asserts that the most important value in the world is the human person. The concept of personality implies that of totality and independence: some poor and oppressed can be the person, its forms a whole and lives on independently as a person.

Also noteworthy is the "irrepeatability" and uniqueness of each person which makes it unique with an indestructible and sacred dignity. Human persons recognize each other in their identity.

Man's identity can only be defined by taking as a starting point this dynamic encounter with otherness. The "I" therefore can only find himself in meeting with a "you". It is why Emmanuel Mounier described the person as openness to the world by its corporality.

This is also the thought of Gabriel Marcel in his book *Homo Viator* in which he highlights the function of the body in its social mediation. If human existence is "being with" others, be open to others, this is made possible through the body and its language. The body is not only presence to the others but it is also the synthesis of the memory of the past, present and future facing society.

The human person is a being made for the relationship; a social and relational being. This relationship therefore concerns always three levels: self, others and God.

Emmanuel Mounier noted:

"The act of love is the strongest human certainty, the irrefutable existential cogito: I love, so the being is, and life is (worth living)."

E. Mounier, *Personalism*, op. cit., p. 35.

### **The person as a participation**

Another feature of the human person is the faculty of self-determination based on reflection, and which is manifested in the fact that man, acting, chooses what he wants to do. By this power of free will, the person is master of himself. The person is therefore incommunicable, inalienable and independent in its actions: No one can want in my place. By corporeity and posed choices is manifested the joy of being and doing.

But Karol Wojtyła also notes that "human acts are performed by men" in common with other "men." Participation is thus the characteristic of the act of the person "in common with others." The ability to participate to humanity as such of every man is the root of all participation.

Possible reasons of break-down of the inner unity of the person

In a meditation on the “unselfish gift”, John Paul II on 8 February 1994 wrote:

“I will not avail ... I will not destroy ... I will not diminish ... I will highlight ...” *Totus Tuus* “. Yes one has to be totally a gift, an unselfish gift to recognize in every person the gift that she is - in order to give thanks to the Creator for this gift of the person. «

### **Wound regarding the identity of the person and the refusal of its life**

If the person is not recognized in its identity, it will not be recognized in its indestructible and sacred dignity. The direct consequence will be to consider its life as not worth the trouble of living, hence the temptation to refuse to host life and want to destroy it.

So many people experience at the root of their existence, a refusal to be welcomed into this world while every human life should always be considered as good. Anyone who experiences in his story this symbolic rejection of his life, may have difficulty believing its incomparable value and accept itself in its dignity.

### **Wound involving communion and truth of what it is**

What can hurt the communion and love is the principle of utilitarianism. Indeed as pointed out by Karol Wojtyla “love” is opposed to “use”.

The principle of utilitarianism is to consider the other not for what it is but for what it does. To use of a person, is to reduce it to the status of object and thus deny the truth of what it is. Emmanuel Mounier says:

“I treat others as objects when I treat them as a missing person, as a repository of information for my own use or as an instrument at my mercy.” E. Mounier, *Personalism*, op. cit., p. 36.

### **Wound involving the participation and willingness to choose love**

The person is made participant of life, impact of being. Its freedom can also be expressed in this participation to the relationship and to existence. Karol Wojtyla denounces two systems which are a negation of the human participation in the expression of his freedom in asserting its identity and its contribution to the building of society: individualism or totalitarianism.

Persons who suffer individualism or a form of totalitarianism at the beginning of their existence are then considered as if their opinions do not matter. These persons are then reduced in their participatory role and do not know how to choose to love and be loved.

### **The share of innocence of the person**

These three levels of wound are at the start of the history of a person, without liability on its part. This is what might be called its share of innocence. Because the blow is primarily experienced in each of the cases presented above. This is important to emphasize because it helps release the person of any false guilty in the experimented situation.

So it is here primarily a suffered pain, caused by assaulting or traumatic event, most often during childhood, but sometimes later in life. A relational dysfunction with the father or mother or another family member can also be seen as a lack of love. The impact may be of psychological order (with defensive reactions or closing on oneself) or of spiritual order.

### **The dynamics of self-giving and the issue of inner liberation**

The Second Vatican Council in its pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* says:

“Man, the only creature on earth which God willed for himself, cannot fully find himself except through an unselfish gift of himself” (GS # 24).

### **Characteristics of self-giving**

The ability to enter in relationship with others requires the usage of speech, of language. For the language to be fair and correct, a fundamental requirement is necessary: the language must correspond to its inner meaning, that is to say, the truth of the body.

The body can communicate with a double language: the body can express the person (interiority); the person can communicate and express itself through the body. The gift is rich in meanings, relationships and meaningful intentions, through which the links are expressed. When there is gift, a gift of the person, it is clear that this gift must be total, reciprocal and exclusive.

As part of the vocation to marriage, John Paul II emphasized that “this total physical gift would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of total self-giving.” As Karol Wojtyla recalls in love and responsibility “Freedom and truth determine the spiritual imprint marking the various manifestations of life and human action.”

For John Paul II so that this gift be total implies the prospect of fecundity:

“This totality required by conjugal love corresponds to the demands of responsible fecundity: this one, being intended to engender a human being.”

(Cf. FC 11)

### **Three dimensions of the gift of the person are characterized:**

- A genuine love which seeks the welfare of the other.

Karol Wojtyla says: “True love perfects the being of the person and flourishes its existence. (...) The love of a person for another one must be benevolent to be true, otherwise it will not be love, but only selfishness. (...) Kindness, is the unselfishness in love; not “I want you as a good,” but “I want your own good”, “I want what’s good for you.” K. Wojtyla, Love and Responsibility, op. cit., pp. 59-60.

- Lived in the truth for a free engagement of the will. Karol Wojtyla highlights:

“Freedom and truth penetrate deeply acts and human moods and give them that particular content which we find no trace in the animal life. (...) The will in the person is the last instance without the participation of which nothing has value or weight corresponding to the essence of the person. (...) A truly free commitment of the will is only possible on the basis of truth. “ K. Wojtyla Love and Responsibility, p. 87.

- Open to fecundity for the reception of life.

Karol Wojtyla wrote:

“Sexual relationships of man and woman in marriage have the full value of a union of persons only when they assume the acceptance of the possibility of procreation. (...) If we exclude from conjugal relationships radically or completely the potential element of fatherhood and motherhood, thereby we transform the mutual relationship of the persons. “ Love and Responsibility, pp. 176-177.

### **Obstacles to self-giving**

- The opposite of love is hate. Hatred of a person necessarily will have an impact on relationships with its entourage.

- The opposite of truth is lie. The pledge of gift of the person can be altered by a choice of infidelity. The lie may also involve social or professional commitments.

- The opposite of life is a choice for death: either vis-à-vis of oneself or vis-à-vis of somebody else. It can be also as a refusal to welcome a new life.

### **The notion of spiritual connection**

By setting down an intrinsically evil act, so there is disintegration of the person. As recalled by Wojtyla: “The disintegrated person is unable of control or of self-possession.”

The result is a tendency to repeat the act, either by habit or by the imprint that this act left on the person by doing it. There is as a loss of self-control that can go up to alienating the person with the committed act. The concept of “spiritual connection” is here emphasized.

One therefore understands the need for an inner liberation regarding the person in its unitotality since it is totally affected by the act that it has laid.

### **The share of responsibility of the person**

We have seen the person is able to self-determination and self-control. The person chooses what it wants and acts. This free will makes it accountable for its acts. Man as a person realized himself in the act. Karol Wojtyla speaks of "the integration of the person in the act" that is to say, it's all the person in its psychosomatic totality that is engaged in every of its actions. Each act is a certain "integrality".

### **When man acts: something happens in man.**

Wojtyla explains: "It is precisely in the act that the entire psychosomatic complexity becomes every time specific unity of the person and act." *Love and Responsibility*, p. 224.

But if there is an "integration of the person in the act", unfortunately it can also be a "disintegration of the person in the act." Karol Wojtyla explains:

"By disintegration, in the basic meaning of this term, we understand that, in the self-possessive structure and self-control proper to the person, appears as a defect or a failure of this structure. (...) The disintegrated person is unable of control or self-possession. "

K. Wojtyla, *Person and act*, op. cit., p. 220.

There are acts that are intrinsically evil: for example we can not say no to life and say yes to God. In his encyclical document *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II specifies the nature of these intrinsically evil acts quoting the Second Vatican Council GS27

"Everything that is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical or mental torture, psychological stress;

"Anything that offends the dignity of man, as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and youth; as well as disgraceful working conditions that reduce workers to the level of simple instruments, without regard for their free and responsible persons;"

"All these practices and others similar are, indeed, infamous. While they poison human civilization, they dishonor those who do them even more than those who suffer from them and insult seriously the honor of the Creator. " Cfr. VS No. 79-83.

In this text is underlined the distinction between an evil that is suffered from an evil that would be committed. It follows two types of consequences: those resulting from a suffered evil (without liability on the part of the person being offended) and those resulting from a committed evil.

These acts intrinsically evil have a negative influence on the different human dimensions: God-centered, personal, social and material. Such acts creates in the person who commits them a series of splits:

'Division between man and the Creator, division in the heart and in the being of man, division between men and human groups, division between man and nature created by God. "

John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio and paenitentia*, Ed. Téqui, Paris 1984, # 24.

We understand here that the responsibility of the person is committed since it is a voluntary act. It is not here a sustained position but a choice made by the person, with the performance of an act, this is why we speak of "share of responsibility". By accomplishing this act, it is whole the person who is engaged in his whole being. So is created a connection with this intrinsically evil act chosen and set out. This connection relates to the unitotality of the person and will prevent its human and spiritual growth.

### **The need for an inner liberation**

At this stage of our reflection, we better understand the need for an inner liberation. This inner liberation, pointing out the exit from a situation of slavery, dependency, servitude, vis-à-vis of what could crush, paralyze

or silence a person. The inner liberation is intended to establish or restore the spiritual freedom which is the characteristics of God's children who are not slaves of evil and sin. Cfr. B. Dubois - Desbois D. *The inner liberation*, op. cit., p. 211.

Spiritual liberation will particularly concern the "connection" or spiritual obstacle which distorts the relationship of man with others and disturbs his behavior involving the whole of his person. The goal is that the person can be released from her bonds, so she can have a harmonious relationship with oneself, others and God. Inner liberation will encourage openness to life, to truth, to the relationship, to love and restore the ability to welcome (God, self, others) to receive oneself from another, to let be loved.

Is free indeed, the one that is open to the gift of the other. To greet and receive constitutes the indispensable step to love, and to give back in an unselfish gift what has been received. We understand that this inner liberation may be made by the only strengths of man but by the mediation of Christ came to save the whole man and all men. Only Christ with the collaboration of the person can liberate her from what limits her and prevent her to love in all the dimensions of her being.

At the beginning of his public ministry, Christ reveals the program of his messianic mission "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners: liberation! Recovery of sight for the blind: enlightenment! To set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor!" (Lk 4: 18-19). Christ is truly the only liberator and saviour of every man and of all men.