

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY

## The authority of Christ, the great appeal of John Paul II

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John Paul II died on 2 April 2005 at 9.37 p.m. at the age of 84. There are many memories of his long and in many ways grandiose pontificate, but one particular memory almost inevitably stands out: his appeal of 22 October 1978, in his first homily as Pope, not to

be afraid: "Do not be afraid! Open, rather, the doors to Christ! Open to his saving power the borders of states, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilisation and development. Do not be afraid! Christ knows 'what is in man'. He alone knows!" Even today we are struck by this reference to the *potestas* of Christ, a term dear to the pre-conciliar Church and hardly accepted by the post-conciliar Church. In the same sermon, the new Pope decided to follow in the footsteps of Paul VI and not to receive the triple crown on his head as a symbol, as he said, of the temporal power of the Church, but he did not renounce proclaiming the "supreme power of Christ himself" and extending it to States, to economic and political systems, therefore not only to hearts but also to public life. The word "power" appears several times in the homily: "Help the Pope and all those who wish to serve Christ and, with the power of Christ, to serve humanity and all humanity!"

**With these words, the new Pope referred to the Second Vatican Council** and proposed a "personalist" version of the power of Christ: his power would consist in revealing man to himself and therefore, one might think, in making the proclamation of Christ pass through man, through an indirect and secularised presence of the Church on the social and political scene. Some might think it's a kind of "anthropological choice". But this aspect is overcome by the extension of the power of Christ to all areas of social and political life, including the States, and thus by a Catholic "identity" in society, both through the activity of the laity, which we can call indirect, and through that of the Church herself, especially through the sacraments, which we can call direct. John Paul II didn't repeat word for word the positions of Leo XIII or Pius X; there had been the Council and he had participated in it with absolute conviction, always defending even the controversial parts and some passages of the texts that still cause some perplexity today. He had worked on *Gaudium et spes* and had always defended it, even though it was the text most criticised, both by the theologians who had participated in the work as experts and by other authoritative commentators. Even from the perspective of the Council, John Paul II did not want to renounce the doctrine of the *potestas* of Christ, of his kingship, which is also social and not only spiritual, and of the goal of recapitulating in him all things, those of heaven and those of earth.

**Twenty-six and a half years of pontificate is a long time** and it is difficult to summarise it in a single criterion. However, if one dares to do so, it can be said that throughout his pontificate Pope Wojtyła remained faithful to this invitation to maintain a broad and not merely intimate sense of the *potestas* of Christ, while at the same time remaining faithful to the Council and even exalting its work. There are many signs to support this assessment. First of all, his commitment to address some of the raw nerves

of modernity in order to free them from modernism and bring them back into the sacred fold. Human rights, for example, remained for him a battleground against modern philosophy and the theologies that succumbed to it, but with the new intention of reversing their meaning and attributing them to Christianity. The Church presented itself as the last defender of human rights, based not on convention but on the law of the Creator. Freedom, another crucial theme of the war in the past, was now reclaimed by the Church, but also reversed in meaning: freedom ceases to be such if it is not rooted in truth. Modernism had to be fought on its own ground, by reversing its assumptions.

**A second area concerns the great revival of the Church's social doctrine.** Here John Paul II did not return to the "Christian society": the Council did not allow it, having approved freedom of religion and therefore the secularity of politics. However, he did not refrain from attributing to the social doctrine an *essential* purpose for the Church, *missionary* and *evangelising*. Social doctrine, as the proclamation of Christ in temporal realities, does not directly evoke "Christian society", but it does so indirectly. The same can be said of culture, with the idea that faith is capable of creating culture and, as everyone knows, when you create culture, you also create a civilisation. He was convinced of the need for a Catholic identity in society and politics, something that Catholic personalism had denied, but which he wanted to reaffirm and substantiate with his Christocentric personalism, already well expressed in *Redemptor hominis*. His teachings on life, the family, morality, the relationship between faith and reason do not go back to Thomism, but neither do they deny it, and in any case they recommend it. So to write in an encyclical - *Fides et ratio* - that a metaphysics of the act of being is indispensable to Catholic theology says a lot about what he said, what he intended to say and how much he was allowed to say.

**It was a generous, courageous, impressive undertaking by a man** who touched on all the themes of Catholic life, including a new edition of the Catechism. There was no shortage of setbacks and (perhaps unintentional) misunderstandings. Given the minefield in which he operated, they must be taken into account without dwelling too much on them. They should be honoured and remembered with gratitude, like a soldier. That's all he could have done. Now the context has changed. Those who lead the Church today did not experience the Council or the post-Council period directly; in fact, we are talking about a post-post-Council period. However, it cannot be denied that many elements of the "spirit of the Council", which John Paul II fought against, without being able to say that he won, given the fierce opposition he faced, have been rediscovered and revived, hardly mentioning the Council.