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John Paul II and respect for local cultures

Abstract: The cultural issue has undoubtedly been one of the main ideas of John Paul II's pontificate. This paper reviews the main definitions of culture that the Polish Pope left us, relating them to the identity of peoples. In this same sense, a brief analysis of the phenomenon of globalization is made as it was developed by John Paul II, and it ends with a brief reference to the impact of this phenomenon on local cultures.

Keywords: Evangelization of culture; Globalization; Local cultures; Multiculturalization

1. Introduction

From the beginning of his pontificate, John Paul II showed an interest and deep concern for the problems of cultures. This led him to repeatedly speak out on the issue, and even to create a specific Dicastery, the Pontifical Council for Culture, to deal with this issue.

It is enough just to recall the familiar expression of “evangelization of culture” or “inculturation of the Gospel”, which John Paul II helped to popularize, and which brings so many reminiscences to those of us who are already of a certain age because it marked many years of pastoral action of the Church throughout the world. Even today, the expression is still used very frequently.

Throughout his pontificate, then, John Paul II has had numerous interventions on the cultural question, which can be considered a central axis in his teaching.

2. First element: towards a definition of “culture”

We can differentiate some elements in John Paul II's discourse on cultures. A first element revolves around a first approximation to the term “culture”, which is characterized as a universal phenomenon. In all cultures, as it is stated in the first

number of the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998), “there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?”

John Paul II defined culture with different words: as “that through which man, as man, becomes more man” [John Paul II 1980: 7], or as “a specific way of ‘existing’ and ‘being’ of man” [John Paul II 1980: 6], and as a “*the form of man’s self-expression in his journey through history, on the level of both individuals and social groups*” [John Paul II 2001: 4]. Finally, and perhaps the most practical definition, culture is defined as “the whole of the principles and values which make up the ethos of a people” [John Paul II 1982].

Culture is not fixed, rather it is something dynamic, which is being transformed “because people meet in new ways and share with each other their ways of life. Cultures are fed by the communication of values, and they survive and flourish insofar as they remain open to assimilating new experiences” [John Paul II 1998: 71].

3. Second element: different cultures

Cultural vitality is manifested, among other things, in the formation and development of numerous local cultures. So, as a second distinctive feature of the Polish Pope’s approach to the theme of culture, we must say that, more than any other Pontiff, John Paul II insisted on speaking of “cultures” in the plural, rather than “culture” in the singular. This cannot surprise us in a Pope who gave his Pontificate such a travelling and cosmopolitan character.

In the Address to the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture, the Polish Pope affirms that “Man always lives according to a culture which is specifically his, and which, in its turn, creates among men a tie which is also specifically theirs, determining the inter-human and social character of human existence. In the unity of culture as the specific way of human existence, there is rooted at the same time the plurality of cultures in the midst of which man lives. In this plurality, man develops without losing, however, the essential contact with the unity of culture as the fundamental and essential dimension of his existence and his being” [John Paul II 1980: 6].

In 2001, John Paul II recognized that “one is always amazed at the complexity and diversity of human cultures. Each of them is distinct by virtue of its specific

historical evolution and the resulting characteristics which make it a structurally unique, original and organic whole” [John Paul II 2001: 4].

When mentioning this theme of the cultural manifestations of humanity, it becomes impossible not to mention the testimonials numbers 14 and 15 of the Speech to the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (1980). In them, John Paul II, in an evidently proudly manner, uses his nation’s own experience as an example to affirm that the sovereignty of peoples lies, ultimately, in the strength of their culture. Let me extract the gist of these two issues, to read it with you:

“I am the son of a Nation which has lived the greatest experience of history, which its neighbours have condemned to death several times, but which has survived and remained itself. It has kept its identity, and it has kept, in spite of partitions and foreign occupations, its national sovereignty, not by relying on the resources of physical power, but solely by relying on its culture. This culture turned out in the circumstances to be more powerful than all other forces (...). There exists a fundamental sovereignty of society which is manifested in the culture of the Nation. It is a question of the sovereignty through which, at the same time, man is supremely sovereign. When I express myself in this way, I am also thinking, with deep interior emotion, of the cultures of so many ancient peoples which did not give way when confronted with the civilizations of the invaders: and they still remain for man the source of his “being” as a man in the interior truth of his humanity. I am also thinking with admiration of the cultures of new societies, those that are awakening to life in the community of their own Nation—just as my Nation awakened to life ten centuries ago—and that are struggling to maintain their own identity and their own values against the influences and pressure of models proposed from outside. Addressing you (...), I say to you: with all the means at your disposal, watch over the fundamental sovereignty that every Nation possesses by virtue of its own culture. Cherish it like the apple of your eye for the future of the great human family. Protect it! Do not allow this fundamental sovereignty to become the prey of some political or economic interest. Do not allow it to become a victim of totalitarian and imperialistic systems or hegemonies, for which man counts only as an object of domination and not as the subject of his own human existence” [John Paul II 1980: 14 and 15].

John Paul II is telling us here that local cultures base nothing more and nothing less than the sovereignty of a nation. This is an interesting contribution not only

to the magisterium of the Church but also to contemporary sociological-political thought. Pope John Paul also provides us with an answer and an antidote to cultural colonialism that he will also courageously denounce.

But, in addition, local cultures play a fundamental role as a “structuring element of one’s personality”. Indeed, “(w)ithout a firm rooting in a specific “soil”, individuals risk being subjected (...) to an excess of conflicting stimuli which could impair their serene and balanced development. It is on the base of this essential relationship with one’s own “origins” – on the level of the family, but also of territory, society and culture – that people acquire a sense of their nationality, and culture tends to take on, to a greater or lesser degree in different places, a “national” configuration” [John Paul II 2001: 6].

4. Third element: migrations, cultural minorities, and multiculturalism

This emphasis placed on the variety and multiplicity of cultures coincides with the great diffusion of the concept of “multiculturality” or “multiculturalism” in the field of contemporary social sciences, a notion that was driven by the importance acquired by the phenomenon of migrations and migrants. Entire members of different ethnic groups living together within States where both the language and the customs, beliefs and practices do not coincide (and could even be conflictive), with the consequent potential for conflict that this situation could entail. The recognition of the identity of these minorities was not raised in an easy way in contemporary societies, and a reflection on it was necessary to find channels for dialogue and meeting.

John Paul II takes the cause of these cultures to himself, clearly establishing the rights and obligations of migrants and local minorities: “There is also a need for commitment in identifying possible forms of genuine integration on the part of immigrants who have been legitimately received into the social and cultural fabric of the different European nations. This demands not yielding to indifference regarding universal human values and a concern for safeguarding the cultural patrimony proper to each nation” [John Paul II 2003: 102].

In the Message for the celebration of the XXII World Day of Peace, he addresses the burning issue of minorities along the same lines: “As communities which take their origin from separate cultural traditions, racial and ethnic stock, religious beliefs, or historical experiences, minority groups exist in almost all societies today. Some go very far back in time, others are of recent origin. The situations in which they

live are so diverse that it is almost impossible to draw up a complete picture of them. On the one hand there are groups, even very small ones, which are able to preserve and affirm their own identity and are very well integrated within the societies to which they belong. In some cases, such minority groups even succeed in imposing their control on the majority in public life. On the other hand one sees minorities which exert no influence and do not fully enjoy their rights, but rather find themselves in situations of suffering and distress" [John Paul II 1989: 2].

Saint John Paul II establishes two fundamental common principles that must be respected in these situations, and that must even be "the foundation of all social organization": the first is the inalienable dignity of each human person, "without distinctions related to their racial, ethnic, cultural, national, or religious belief." The right not to be discriminated against for these reasons is inferred here. But it also follows the fact that "human groups (...) have a right to a collective identity that must be safeguarded, in accordance with the dignity of each member". In other words, the inalienable dignity of the person projects its consequences on the right to the collective identity of peoples and cultures. The second principle that must be considered in these situations refers to The second principle concerns the fundamental unity of the human race, which takes its origin from the one God, the Creator "the fundamental unity of the human race, which takes its origin from the one God, the Creator" [John Paul II 1989: 3].

Minorities have the right to exist, John Paul II tells us in that same Message [John Paul II 1989: 5]. And that right brings with it the right to "preserve and develop their own culture (...). Closely connected with this right is the right to have contact with groups having a common cultural and historical heritage but living in the territory of another State" [John Paul II 1989: 7]. In this sense, the Polish Pope draws our attention here to the fact that "in some places, (...) laws have been enacted which do not recognize [minorities] their right to use their own language. At times people are forced to change their family and place names. Some minorities see their artistic and literary expressions ignored, with their festivals and celebrations given no place in public life. All this can lead to the loss of a notable cultural heritage" [John Paul II 1989: 7].

Years later, the Polish Pope would say that "(h)ow migrants are welcomed by receiving countries and how well they become integrated in their new environment are also an indication of how much effective dialogue there is between the various cultures" [John Paul II 2001: 12].

5. Fourth element: an incorrect understanding of globalization

But this emphasis placed on respect for minorities and local cultures faced (still faces) an even more subtle challenge: an erroneous interpretation of the phenomenon of globalization, through which, following an economist and market logic, some claimed, impose a single culture and way of being on all local cultures. And, behind this imposition – let’s not kid ourselves – a whole series of legal, social and economic reforms were promoted that went far beyond consuming this or that food or listening to this or that type of music or dressing in this or that way. A certain “standardization” of societies could come from the misunderstanding of the phenomenon of globalization.

Several times, Pope John Paul II raised his voice to warn about these pretensions that entered almost inadvertently into local cultures. The dangers: the loss of authentic values around which entire peoples had built their way of life. “We now see a process of globalization which tends to underestimate distinctiveness and variety, and which is marked by the rise of new forms of ethno-centrism and exaggerated nationalism. In such a situation, the challenge is to promote and pass on a living culture, a culture capable of fostering communication and brotherhood between different groups and peoples, and between the different fields of human creativity. Today’s world is challenging us, in other words, to know and respect one another in and through the diversity of our cultures. If we respond, the human family will enjoy unity and peace, while individual cultures will be enriched and renewed, purified of all that poses an obstacle to mutual encounter and dialogue” [John Paul II 1999: 4].

In addition, in the message for the World Day of Peace in 2001, he stated: “The radicalization of identity which makes cultures resistant to any beneficial influence from outside is worrying enough; but no less perilous is *the slavish conformity of cultures*, or at least of key aspects of them, to cultural models deriving from the Western world. Detached from their Christian origins, these models are often inspired by an approach to life marked by secularism and practical atheism and by patterns of radical individualism. This is a phenomenon of vast proportions, sustained by powerful media campaigns and designed to propagate lifestyles, social and economic programmes and, in the last analysis, a comprehensive worldview which erodes from within other estimable cultures and civilizations. Western cultural models are enticing and alluring because of their remarkable scientific and technical cast, but regrettably there is growing evidence of their deepening human, spiritual and moral impoverishment” [John Paul II 2001: 9].

John Paul II repeatedly expressed the Church's concerns regarding globalization and the identity of local cultures, especially the fact that globalization precisely "has quickly become a cultural phenomenon". For the Polish Pope, this meant that "the market as an exchange mechanism has become the medium of a new culture", presenting "the intrusive, even invasive, character (...). The market imposes its way of thinking and acting, and stamps its scale of values upon behaviour. Those who are subjected to it often see globalization as a destructive flood threatening the social norms which had protected them and the cultural points of reference which had given them direction in life" [John Paul II 2001a: 3].

This process challenges and hits local cultures hard, as it occurs "too quickly for cultures to respond". And, in this way, "globalization often risks destroying these carefully built up structures, by exacting the adoption of new styles of working, living and organizing communities. Likewise, at another level, the use made of discoveries in the biomedical field tends to catch legislators unprepared. Research itself is often financed by private groups and its results are commercialized even before the process of social control has had a chance to respond. Here we face a Promethean increase of power over human nature, to the point that the human genetic code itself is measured in terms of costs and benefits" [John Paul II 2001a: 3].

In this sense, in the Message for the World Day of Peace in 2001, Pope Wojtyła warns about "(t)he fact that a few countries have a monopoly on these cultural "industries" and distribute their products to an ever growing public in every corner of the earth can be a powerful factor in undermining cultural distinctness. These products include and transmit implicit value-systems and can therefore lead to a kind of dispossession and loss of cultural identity in those who receive them" [John Paul II 2001: 11].

Once again, it is the same two principles as before that should guide ethical discernment in the context of globalization: the inalienable value of the human person and the value of human cultures, "which no external power has the right to downplay and still less to destroy". In this sense, John Paul II affirms, "(g)lobalization must not be a new version of colonialism", but "must respect the diversity of cultures which, within the universal harmony of peoples, are life's interpretive keys. In particular, it must not deprive the poor of what remains most precious to them, including their religious beliefs and practices, since genuine religious convictions are the clearest manifestation of human freedom". They are

the universal human values that underlie local cultures, “the guiding force of all development and progress” [John Paul II 2001: 4].

5. Conclusion

There was a time when, for a very wide spectrum of cultures, the Christian message meant a common assumption in which fruitful dialogue could be conducted while respecting differences. Our time does not seem to have that presupposed factor, and then the differences appear in the foreground, without a substratum that identifies common values. Despite this, the deepest questions of humanity remain always the same.

The attempt to provide this substratum through human rights appears weak and unconvincing now... Probably because the foundation of these rights, as they seem to be conceived today, does not root too clearly in universal reasons that give them full legitimacy.

The diversity of cultures does not contradict the common nature of the human person, since cultures are “always marked by stable and enduring elements, as well as by changing and contingent features”. It is about solidarity, peace, life, education¹, forgiveness, and reconciliation. These common values, “express humanity’s most authentic and distinctive features” [John Paul II 2001: 5 and 16].

These values are rooted in people’s nature and are the foundation of all cultural dialogue.

While the Church finds the ways to re-strengthen the ability to challenge the men and women of today with the evangelical message, in order to once again constitute a common substratum that bases the values and dignity of the person, these values must be underpinned to be able to sustain, albeit weakly, an acceptable dialogue and coexistence between the various cultures and local perspectives. May Saint John Paul II, ardent promoter of the centrality of cultures, accompany this path that Humanity is currently facing.

¹ This must transmit to the subjects the awareness of their own roots and offer them points of reference that allow them to find their personal situation in the world. At the same time, you must strive to teach respect for other cultures.

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