



FROM THE EDITORS

BEFORE THE TWILIGHT OF THE WEST

“Tramonto dell’Occidente?” (The twilight of the West?)¹ and “Requiem per l’Occidente” (Requiem for the West)² are the titles of two essays by Giorgio Agamben published, in a series “Una Voce,” in the online magazine *Quodlibet* in 2024. For many years now, Agamben has focused his reflection on an analysis of the currently ongoing transformation of Western civilization: the transformation which essentially consists in secularization. However, the Italian thinker does not see the process in question as simply one of “disenchantment” that triggers abandonment of the theistic worldview. Rather, he tends to adopt Carl Schmitt’s insight that „in modernity, theology continues to be present and active in an eminent way.”³

The same phenomenon, namely that of religious or quasi-religious attitudes pervading culture under the guise of its reluctance towards outlooks on reality modelled by religious faith, was addressed by John Paul II in his conversation with Vittorio Messori. “The process of turning away from the God of the Fathers, from the God of Jesus Christ, from the Gospel, and from the Eucharist did not bring about a rupture with a God who exists outside of the world. In fact, the God of the deists was always present; perhaps He was even present in the French Encyclopedists, in the work of Voltaire and of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and even more so in Isaac Newton’s *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, which marked the beginning of modern physics,”⁴ said the Pope. Yet, to this observation, he added a significant remark: “This God, however, is decidedly a God outside of the world. To a mentality shaped by a naturalistic consciousness of the world, a God present in the world appeared

¹ See Giorgio Agamben, “Tramonto dell’occidente?” *Quodlibet*, February 19, 2024, Quodlibet, <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-tramonto-dell-u2019occidente>.

² See Giorgio Agamben, “Requiem per l’Occidente,” *Quodlibet*, July 11, 2025, Quodlibet, <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-requiem-per-l-u2019occidente>.

³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (with Matteo Mandarini) (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), EPUB (Chapter 1, “The Two Paradigms”).

⁴ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori, trans. Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 52–53.

useless; similarly, a God working through man turned out to be useless to modern knowledge, to the modern science of man, which examines the workings of the conscious and the subconscious. The rationalism of the Enlightenment put to one side the true God—in particular, God the Redeemer.”⁵ While showing the implications of the option for “a God outside the world,” John Paul II used the phrase “live ... as if God did not exist,”⁶ which in time became an important point of reference in the debates on the state of a culture with Christian roots.

In a culture which promotes living “as if God did not exist,” the concept of the Redeemer is considered as being in conflict with reason, which—as opposed to God—remains the crucial point of reference for human aspirations and actions. The idea of “a God outside of the world” in turn—which, according to John Paul II, is merely “an unverifiable hypothesis”⁷—is not in conflict with the model of life “as if God did not exist,” since it does not prevent reason from aspiring to wield full power.

In 1994, when Messori’s extensive interview with John Paul II was published, the pontificate of the Polish Pope was over halfway through, and, at that time, one might have already witnessed the beginning of the abandonment of the positivist belief in the omnipotence of human reason which makes its inferences based almost exclusively on the empirical view of reality. In the awoken longing for the sacred—explored by thinkers such as Mircea Eliade—John Paul II would see a testimony to the self-preservation instinct of the civilization which had introduced a necessary correction in the paradigm of one-dimensional thinking that would have otherwise made it blind to an entire spectrum of experience described in a symbolic and metaphorical language rather than in the language of mathematics exclusively.⁸

The timelessness and the popularity of the philosophy of religion—not only in its phenomenological variety, to which John Paul II refers in his conversation with Messori—prompted a hope that the Christian culture would find a favorable environment for its growth. However, the Pope clearly saw the risk that the new interest in spirituality might take the form of a new gnosis, such as, for instance, New Age, a conglomeration of the sort. While avoiding an open confrontation with the New Age beliefs, John Paul II would clearly point to the openly anti-Christian character of the philosophical ideas and para-religious practices which, as its elements, were “in distinct, if not declared, conflict with all that is essentially

⁵ *Ibidem*, 53.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ In Messori’s conversation with John Paul II, Eliade is mentioned as a representative of hermeneutic thinking which explores the meanings of the symbolic language. See *ibidem*, 35. Although Mircea Eliade passed away in 1986, his work was still vividly discussed in the 1990s.

Christian.”⁹ The gnostic anti-Christianism—which in the years to come would manifest its still new varieties and which soon began to openly challenge Christianity it deemed an obstacle on the path to a “brave new world”—was considered by the Pope as a manifestation of the phenomenon of man repeatedly usurping the place of God and wishing to replace the Revelation present in God’s Word with a human invention, with what John Paul II called “purely human words.”¹⁰

The Pope’s critique of anti-Christianism did not result from his intention to defend the position of the Church in the world. Rather, John Paul II wished to express his concern about the destructive potential of such intellectual currents, which he considered as dangerous to culture as much as to individual persons. Already at the time of the intellectual ferment accompanying the Second Vatican Council—which, as we know, greatly contributed to Karol Wojtyła’s intellectual formation—Joseph Ratzinger shared his anxiety about the anti-sacramental nature of the postwar culture. He noticed the paradox of the time, one rarely, if ever, recognized today: the fact that the proliferation of sacramental theology, unprecedented in the history of Christianity and triggered by the rediscovery of the spiritual riches of ancient Christian liturgy, was accompanied by an equally unprecedented anti-sacramental nature of the culture of the time: “In a time when we have grown accustomed to seeing in the substance of things nothing but the material for human labor—when, in short, the world is regarded as matter and matter as material—initially there is no room left for that symbolic transparency of reality toward the eternal on which the sacramental principle is based.... The contemporary understanding of the world is functionalist: it sees things merely as things, as a function of human labor and accomplishment, and given such a starting point, it is no longer possible to understand how a ‘thing’ can become a ‘sacrament.’”¹¹ Another aspect of the paradox lies in that the materialist anti-sacramentalism of culture disembodies man: “The error of anti-sacramental idealism consists in the fact that it wants to make man into a pure spirit in God’s sight. Instead of a man, the only thing remaining is a ghost that does not exist, and any religiosity that tried to build on such foundations has built on shifting sand.”¹² According to the German theologian, the disembodiment anti-sacramental attitude is “based on

⁹ Ibidem, 90.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Collected Works*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Muller et al., vol. 2, *Theology of the Liturgy*, ed. Michael J. Miller, trans. John Saward et al. (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2014), EPUB (Part B: “Typos—Misterium—Sacramentum, I. The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence; 1. Preliminary Considerations: The Crisis of the Sacramental Idea in Modern Consciousness”).

¹² Ibidem (Part B: “Typos—Misterium—Sacramentum, I. The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence; 4. The Meaning of Sacraments Today”).

a twofold anthropological error¹³ which combines the heresy inherent in idealism with that characteristic of the Marxist positions. The idealistic component of the anthropological error—which reached its extreme in the writings of Johann Gottlieb Fichte—consists in the misreading of human nature as that of an autonomous spirit combining will and freedom, and thus capable of forming himself completely by himself.¹⁴ On the other hand, it was Marxism that put forward the idea that man is merely *homo faber*, to whom things in themselves are no more than functions of his work; neither things nor their symbolic meaning have any relevance to him, which eliminates the very basis of sacramental life.¹⁵

Four decades later, in his work entitled *A Secular Age*,¹⁶ Charles Taylor wrote about the problem he described as an “excarnation”¹⁷ of Christianity, the essence of which lay in “a transfer out of embodied, ‘enfleshed’ forms of religious life, to those which are ‘more in the head.’”¹⁸ The Canadian philosopher considers it as obvious that the process of “excarnation” was in conflict with the mystery of the Divine incarnation, which is among the most essential truths of the Christian faith. While looking at the phenomenon in question from a wide perspective of various religious and philosophical traditions, Taylor takes into consideration, among others, objects endowed with sacramental power, acknowledging with regret, that the power our predecessors found in them can hardly be found in a culture that persuades man that the consolation he wants to find resides “in the head”¹⁹; indeed, in his own head.

The anthropological error Ratzinger identified resulted in that the civilization of the Christian West entered the state of a deep crisis, the essence of which was described by John Paul II in his Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*.²⁰ The nature of the crisis—expounds the Pope—is the conflict that marks our civilization, which is dominated by secularism: “In seeking the deepest roots of the struggle between the ‘culture of life’ and the ‘culture of death,’ we cannot restrict ourselves to the perverse idea of freedom.... We have to go to the heart of the tragedy being experienced by modern man: the eclipse of the sense of God and of man, typical of a social and cultural climate dominated by secularism, which, with its ubiquitous tentacles, succeeds at times in putting Christian communities

¹³ See *ibidem*.

¹⁴ See *ibidem*.

¹⁵ See *ibidem*.

¹⁶ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 554.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 613.

²⁰ See John Paul II, Encyclical on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life *Evangelium Vitae*, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

themselves to the test. Those who allow themselves to be influenced by this climate easily fall into a sad vicious circle: when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man, of his dignity and his life; in turn, the systematic violation of the moral law, especially in the serious matter of respect for human life and its dignity, produces a kind of progressive darkening of the capacity to discern God's living and saving presence."²¹

In his prophetic encyclical, in another place, John Paul II repeats St. Paul's exhortation, "'Walk as children of light ... and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness' (Eph 5:8,10–11). In our present social context, marked by a dramatic struggle between the 'culture of life' and the 'culture of death,' there is need to develop a deep critical sense, capable of discerning true values and authentic needs."²² The Pope's appeal refers to the moral choices which directly affect the shape of the culture in which we live, so that—depending on our decisions—it serves either life or death. Since 1995, which was the seventeenth year of the pontificate of John Paul II and the year in which the Pope reminded his contemporaries that "de vitae humanae inviolabili bono," the world, as seen from the perspective of this particularly sensitive issue pertaining to human life, has assumed a shape that cannot but arouse anxiety. Suffice it to mention the bill passed in 2021 in Canada, resulting in a radical increase in the number of euthanasia deaths in that country, or the inclusion of the so-called "right to choose" in the French Constitution in 2024.

In his article written in the fall of 2024, in which he soberly commented upon the victory of Donald Trump in the presidential election, perceived by many as a chance for a significant weakening of the "culture of death," Alan Fimister (the co-author of an interesting manual of political philosophy)²³ summed up the current state of the war between the two cultures: "Amidst the diabolical anarchy, neo-pogroms, sodomarriage, the self-slaughter of the elderly and the sick, and people mutilating themselves to conform to their delusions about being trapped in the wrong body, it may seem as if there is no hope for the tranquility of order on this earth. Undoubtedly the hour is late."²⁴

However, Fimister, an intellectual committed to the defense of the rights of the traditional family, wishes, above all, to contribute to upholding the Christian hope, which is also the leitmotif of *Evangelium Vitae*, an encyclical calling for hope. In Fimister's article, the appeal to sustain the virtue of hope

²¹ Ibidem, Section 21.

²² Ibidem, Section 95.

²³ See Thomas Crean and Alan Fimister, *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: Editiones Scholasticae, 2020).

²⁴ See Alan Fimister, "Say Not the Struggle Nought Availeth," *Voice of the Family*, November 13, 2024, Voice of the Family: A Lay Initiative Formed to Defend Catholic Teaching on the Family, <https://voiceofthefamily.com/say-not-the-struggle-nought-availeth/>.

is backed up by the words of John Henry Newman concluding his “Biglietto Speech,” which he delivered in the Palazzo della Pigna, upon receiving the formal message (*biglietto*) that he would be made cardinal by the Pope: “Commonly the Church has nothing more to do than to go on in her own proper duties, in confidence and peace; to stand still and to see the salvation of God.”²⁵ Indeed, Newman was referring to the hope a humble person cherishes which is also expressed in the concluding lines of Psalm 37: “But the poor will inherit the earth, / will delight in great prosperity” (Ps 37:11). In his speech, Newman confessed that all his life he had opposed the spirit of liberalism in religion: the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion. Against such a background, the hope cherished by a humble person quietly awaiting salvation granted by God turns out an assent to the truth of the revealed faith.

The powerful act of hope on the part of the eminent English thinker gains a new meaning in the context of the fact that the current volume of *Ethos: Kwartalnik Instytutu Jana Pawła II KUL* is published at the threshold of the pontificate of Pope Leo XIV, among whose very first decisions was designating St. John Henry Newman a Doctor of the Church. The new Pope has simultaneously shown himself as discerning the need to defend the culture of life. In his first homily, he observed that a world that resorts to securities such as “technology, money, success, power, or pleasure”²⁶ will not hesitate to reject Christ, once it decides that his demands are irksome. On another occasion, Pope Leo XIV defined his role as that of one following in the footsteps of the “‘fisher’ of humanity”²⁷ in order to “draw it up from the waters of evil and death.”²⁸ Faithfulness to this mission in a secularized world dominated by liberalism is—to refer to the well-known title of Newman’s essay²⁹—tantamount to giving assent to the validity of hope.

The authors of the articles compiled in the present volume are also thinkers who can be described as “giving an assent” to hope. Although they are aware of the present civilizational crisis, they do not fall into despair but look for

²⁵ John Henry Newman, “Biglietto Speech,” The National Institute for Newman Studies: A Newman Reader, <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/addresses/file2.html>.

²⁶ “Homily of the Holy Father Leo XIV during the Holy Mass *Pro Ecclesia*” (Vatican, May 9, 2025), The Holy See, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250509-messa-cardinali.html>.

²⁷ “Homily of the Holy Father Leo XIV during the Holy Mass for the Beginning of the Pontificate” (Vatican, May 18, 2025), The Holy See, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250518-inizio-pontificato.html>.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ See John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns, Oates & Co., 1874).

ways of rescue. In his article entitled “Just Society and the Culture of Peace,”³⁰ Jove Jim S. Aguas emphasizes that “we need to confront any ideology that destroys or degrades the human person based on a populist, materialistic, and consumerist orientation.”³¹ Drawing on the rich philosophical and theological reflection on the dignity of the human being present in the thought of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, as well as in the teaching of the Popes who focused on the so-called “social question” (*res socialis*), i.e., Leo XIII, Pius XI, John XXIII, John Paul II, and Francis, Aguas stresses that the Catholic Church has never lost the hope in the plausibility of the positive vision of a peaceful world. Fr. Stanisław Fel, in turn, while discussing the issue of human rights in the teaching of John Paul II, shows an inspiring role of the Pope’s insights in this field, as well the significance of the philosophical work of Karol Wojtyła to the question of the culture of life in its diverse manifestations.³² All the articles—with various intensity and on various planes, such as theology, philosophy, political philosophy, sociology, and pedagogy—comprise penetrating insights into the challenges posed before us by the culture of the first twenty-five years of the twenty first century. What the readers will find in these papers is not merely a report on a civilization in crisis, but—above all—a rational question of how to protect humanity and its living environment from a catastrophe.

In his reflection at the close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, which simultaneously opened a new millennium of the history of humanity and Christianity, John Paul II called us to “put out into the deep” (Lk 5:4) with the hope that “does not disappoint” (Rom 5:5).³³ It is with the very same words of St. Paul’s that Pope Francis opened his Bull of Indiction of the—currently celebrated—Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025 *Spes Non Confundit*.³⁴ The contents of the current volume of *Ethos: Kwartalnik Instytutu Jana Pawła II KUL* well resonate with these exhortations.

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³⁰ See Jove Jim S. Aguas, “Just Society and the Culture of Peace,” *Ethos: Kwartalnik Instytutu Jana Pawła II KUL* 38, no. 3 (151) (2025): 121–54.

³¹ *Ibidem*: 128.

³² See Stanisław Fel, “Uniwersalne kryterium oceny systemów społeczno-gospodarczych: Jana Pawła II koncepcja praw człowieka,” *Ethos: Kwartalnik Instytutu Jana Pawła II KUL* 38, no. 3 (151) (2025): 174–98.

³³ John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 *Novo millennio ineunte*, Section 58, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html.

³⁴ See Francis, Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025 *Spes Non Confundit*, Section 1, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html.