

St. John Paul II Teaches the Unbelievers: A Newly Discovered Manuscript

Uncertain of whether jetlag or excitement had me up and out of bed, I did something I hardly ever do and checked my email at 3:00 AM. There it was: an email from the Vatican publishing house. I opened the pdf of the manuscript I had requested and began scrolling, but stopped when a photographic image of a handwritten page filled the screen. In that very dark California hotel room, with my hand suspended over the screen, I experienced the presence of St. John Paul II in a way I cannot explain.

I do not read Polish, so I quickly copied and pasted the table of contents into an online translator and then, bit by bit, the first few pages. The translation, of course, was rough, but with a bit of smoothing, I could hear his voice. It was unmistakable. Tears welled up when I realized that I was perhaps the very first person to read these words in English.

Sometimes, it is a matter of being at the right place at the right time. I had arranged to meet with the director of Libreria Editrice Vaticana (LEV) two days prior and mostly out of respect. Experience has taught me that most of what LEV publishes is unlikely to be of interest to North American readers. But you never know.

In fact, I was not sure I had heard Fra Giulio correctly. A new work by Archbishop Karol Wojtyła? *Not a compilation? Recently discovered? Literally found in a drawer? And most importantly for my work, English language rights were somehow still available?* But yes, all of that was true, and the result is *Teachings for an Unbelieving World: Newly Discovered Reflections on Paul's Sermon at the Areopagus*.

This work is important both for its theological content and for its historical significance. As such, it can be read through

several lenses. A primary one is, undoubtedly, as a preamble to Wojtyła's later pontificate.

Preamble to a Pontificate

The date of the manuscript is not fully known. Curator Dr. Marta Burghardt concludes that it was likely written in late 1965 or 1966, not long after the closing of the Second Vatican Council. This was also within the context of the 1966 commemoration of one thousand years of Christianity in Poland, albeit under a Soviet-dominated Communist regime. At that time, Karol Wojtyła had been a bishop for less than a decade and Archbishop of Krakow for only two years. He had written a few works, including *Love and Responsibility* (1960), as well as several plays.

It is not clear that the thirteen catecheses that comprise *Teachings for an Unbelieving World* were ever given, or even for whom they were intended. Still, readers with any familiarity of Pope John Paul II's writings will recognize the themes he touches on here. Man's search for God, the relationship of the human person to both truth and freedom, the nature of divine love as both spousal and redemptive, the call to proclaim the Gospel in a culture of unbelief: nearly all the leitmotifs which would appear throughout the twenty-six years of St. John Paul II's papacy are articulated in this extended meditation on the Apostle Paul's sermon at the Areopagus. They are discussed at more length and in more detail in the foreword by George Weigel.

Last Word and Testament

However, because the text has remained unknown until now, it can also be read as a kind of last word and testament. As we observe the centennial of Wojtyła's birth and

the fifteenth anniversary of his death, these catecheses offer a summary of not only what Pope John Paul II set out to do, but the legacy and evangelical imperative he left to the Church as a whole, and to each one of us as believers.

Readers will quickly observe that the work is strangely relevant to our times, perhaps even more so than it was when it was written. The seventeenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles provides Wojtyła with a brilliant point of departure for his elucidation of the challenges Paul faced in proclaiming the Gospel to the intellectual and cultural elite of his day. By inference, Wojtyła sets Paul's example before us, not as a warning, but as a model for both dialogue and faithful inculturation.

A Council Father

There are many who would eagerly apply the sobriquet "the Great" to Pope St. John Paul II. These catecheses, however, may present a challenge to those who hold great affection for the Holy Father, but remain wary of Vatican II. For them, *Teachings for an Unbelieving World* is a reminder that Archbishop Wojtyła was a Council Father—the last to be elected to the Chair of Peter. In this work, his enthusiasm for the Council is tangible. He quotes numerous Vatican II documents throughout *Teachings*, though he does explicitly affirm a hermeneutic of continuity.

On the other hand, there are those who have been tempted to label Wojtyła as an "archconservative". They may find the fact that he draws on the work of Vatican II so extensively surprising, even puzzling. It is clear, however, that as archbishop, Wojtyła strove to both explain and implement the Council's teachings, and did so in the particularly difficult milieu of Communist Po-

land. These catecheses document that fact, as does his *Sources of Renewal*, first published in 1972.

Regardless of one's views regarding Vatican II or its ongoing implementation, any who would attempt to divorce St. John Paul II from the Second Vatican Council will find the two inextricably intertwined in this work.

Pre-Christian World and Post-Christian World

What Archbishop Wojtyla provides in these catecheses is an implicit analogy between pre-Christian Athens and our post-Christian world. For him, the “Unknown God” Paul speaks about at the Areopagus is still “unknown”; not because he has never been known, but because our world has forgotten or chosen to ignore him.

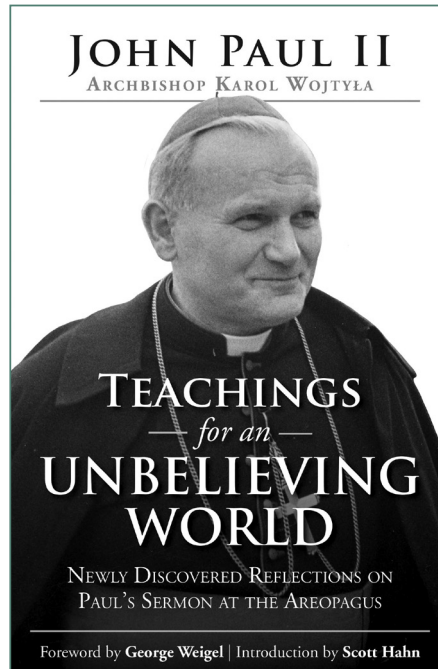
Wojtyla writes powerfully of the God who is not only Creator but existence itself; the God whom St. Paul cites as the one “in whom we live, and move, and have our being.” For Wojtyla, the wisdom of the Apostle's proclamation of the Gospel lies in recognizing the *semina Verbi*, the seeds of the Word, wherever they are found. He notes that Paul did not argue philosophy with the Stoics and Epicureans he encountered at the Areopagus; he did not, as it were, attempt to beat them at their own game. Instead, St. Paul began with recognizing their search for God, and quoted one of their own poets in describing him.

As Wojtyla continues through the series of teachings, he returns often to the words of St. Paul: “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” He notes that modern science presents no genuine obstacle to faith in a God who made the world and all things in it. Similarly, this Creator God, he states, was not completely unknown or unwelcomed by Paul's listeners.

Why, then, did Paul's sermon at the Areopagus largely fail? The answer Wojtyla gives is intriguing. What Christians believe about God does not present an insurmountable obstacle to Paul's listeners. It is the revelation of God in Christ, in humanity, that engenders their opposition to his message. The Athenians cannot accept faith in Jesus Christ because their understanding of the human person is radically different from Paul's biblical one. Their opposition to the Gospel has more to do with anthropology than it does with theology. That may be the primary reason why the Gospel is not received today.

For Wojtyla, the entire Gospel hangs on this truth: God not only creates mankind in his image but “fully reveals man to man

himself” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). Every other anthropology falls short. Man is not the ancient Greek soul banished to bodily entrapment in a material world. Neither is he the utopian Communist ideal or the radical individual actor of the twentieth century. What he is can only be known through faith in the One whose image he bears. And that is revealed only by the Son who shows us the true measure of humanity.



Areopagus and Agora

The theme of the Areopagus framed Archbishop Wojtyla's life of service to the Church and the world. He visited Athens a few times, notably with other Council Fathers in the 1960s, and again during his pilgrimage in the footsteps of St. Paul in 2001. He wrote about the Areopagus in *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) to reaffirm the perpetual mission of the Church to bring salvation to all nations, and again in his 2005 Letter for the World Day of Communications.

In that letter, one of his last, Pope John Paul refers to the world of communications, as the “first Areopagus of the modern age” (RM, 37), and notes with sadness that “perhaps this Areopagus has been neglected”. For him, the Areopagus is everywhere the message of salvation has not yet been integrated: “the immense ‘Areopagus’ of culture, scientific research, and international relations which promote dialogue and open up new possibilities”. In some sense, the discovery of these catecheses provides a missing piece to St. John Paul's thinking about the necessity of engaging culture as well as how to engage those who do not believe.

For St. John Paul proclaiming the Gospel to the Areopagus is not optional. The Church is directed by her very nature to bring the faith to all people, and should not shrink from those who are intellectual or cultural leaders. While there are those who are more comfortable witnessing to Christ in the agora, or marketplace, it was from there that St. Paul was led to the Areopagus. We ought not to be surprised—or afraid—when those opportunities present themselves. We should, however, do our best to be prepared.

Familiar and Fresh

The voice of St. John Paul in *Teachings for an Unbelieving World* is both fresh and warmly familiar. These reflections, while deep, are brief and accessible to most. They present the core of our Catholic faith in a way we have not heard it, drawing their inspiration from Acts 17. The Introduction by Dr. Scott Hahn provides readers with all the relevant background they need to fully understand what St. John Paul sees in this important Scripture passage. Still, the reflections themselves read like Wednesday audiences or homilies at stadium Masses.

Universal and Personal

Among the undeniable gifts of St. John Paul was his ability to address the Universal Church and each individual in it simultaneously. I am convinced that everyone who reads *Teachings for an Unbelieving World* will find the text immensely personal, almost as if it was written to him. For those of us who remember St. John Paul, this book will provide the chance to encounter him again. For those of us who are too young, or were far from the faith during his pontificate, these catecheses offer an opportunity to glimpse St. John Paul II as he was twelve years before he appeared on the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square.

Teachings for an Unbelieving World: Newly Discovered Reflections on Paul's Sermon at the Areopagus by St. John Paul II. Ave Maria Press, 2020; ISBN: 9781594719851; 160 pages; \$20.00

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