

# John P. Hittinger

---

## The Revolution of Conscience in "Centesimus Annus"

---

Philosophy and Canon Law 3, 51-69

---

2017

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

**John P. Hittinger**

The University of St. Thomas, Houston, TX, USA

## The Revolution of Conscience in *Centesimus Annus*

**Abstract:** The article analyzes various uses of the term “conscience” in *Centesimus Annus*. In this way it explains the notion of the “revolution of conscience.” Disregard for the role of conscience in politics, everyday life, as well as disrespect for human rights were germane to the fall of the USSR. The article analyzes and points to four different realms of freedom of conscience and religion as presented in *Centesimus Annus*.

**Keywords:** conscience, 1989 revolution, Leon XIII, workers’ rights, communism, solidarity

## The Revolution of Conscience

John Paul II issued the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* to commemorate the fall of communism in the Soviet block and, more importantly, to explain why communism did not endure and why it could not withstand the challenges it faced in Poland and other Eastern European countries. Those challenges brought into play a “revolution in conscience.” There were undoubtedly complex economic and deep political factors in the demise of the Soviet Union. But at heart it was a moral failure, even a spiritual failure. It was a failure to face up to the demands of conscience from the highest levels of policy to the common level of practical survival, work, and family. The thesis of this paper is that this encyclical displays the notion of the revolution of conscience. We will examine each use of the term conscience in the encyclical and then formulate a more systematic idea of the central role that conscience and religious freedom plays in the thought of John Paul II.

The notion of the revolution of conscience, although not used precisely as such in the encyclical, nevertheless embodies the central argument of the encyclical and the legacy that John Paul II commemorates and passes on to the Church and the world at large. George Weigel frequently uses the notion “revolution of conscience” in his works on Poland and John Paul II. The central point of his book, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism*, concerns the discovery of the deepest and truest cause for the overturning of communism, namely, the awakening of conscience and the embodiment of it in public life.<sup>1</sup> On the first page of his book, *The End and the Beginning*, Weigel states outright: “Eight months after his election to the papacy on October 16, 1978, John Paul had ignited a revolution of conscience in his native Poland—a moral challenge to the Cold War status quo that help set in motion the international drama that would culminate in the collapse of European communism in 1989 and the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991.”<sup>2</sup> In chapter four, “Victory,” Weigel analyzes the events of 1989. He argues that Poland, through the inspiration of John Paul II and Józef Tischner, attempted to “build a genuine human community out of liberated consciences, freed from the inheritance of hatred and egoism.” The Polish people thereby initiated “the revolution of conscience” by living in the truth, living responsibly, living in solidarity. At the end of the book, he assesses John Paul II’s legacy as awakening a sense of the deeper meaning of liberation—“The first and most urgent liberation was liberation into the moral truth about the human person.”

In *Witness to Hope* Weigel approaches the question of the revolution in Poland in the context of political realism and the standard assumption among political scientists that the “engine of history is understood to be economic and military power.”<sup>3</sup> In international relations realism designates the amorality of political decision making. Cardinal Wojtyła disagreed with this view and read history through the prism of moral analysis. During his first visit to Poland in 1979 John Paul II referred to St. Stanisław as the patron of moral order in Poland because he “did not hesitate to confront the ruler when defense of the moral order threatened it.” Adam Michnik praised the pope’s appeal to moral conscience, of believer and unbeliever alike.<sup>4</sup> For good reason then Weigel speaks about “a revolution in spirit,” and a “moral revolution.” He cites the remark of Józef Tischner that the founding of Solidarność was

---

<sup>1</sup> George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (Oxford University Press, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> George Weigel, *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II—The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy* (New York: Doubleday Books, 2010), 1.

<sup>3</sup> George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 291–94.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

a “huge forest planted by awakened consciences.”<sup>5</sup> Weigel also explains that the non-violent character of the revolution of 1989 evinces the deep awakening of and commitment to moral conscience. In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II highlights the role of conscience in the new politics emerging from the events of 1989.

In commenting on the encyclical, Józef Tischner lamented the ruin of his country by the long and oppressive communist occupation—the ruin was not even primarily economic or political but a ruin within each human being.<sup>6</sup> The loss of moral conscience in the external arenas of economics and politics devastated the human person most of all. Tischner applauded section 13 of the encyclical as particularly important because it identified the chief error of socialism as an “anthropological error,” at the heart of which was a denial of human responsibility in the face of good and evil. Hence that failure was the oblivion of conscience. Socialism considered man to be no more than an ant in the anthill, or a cog in the machine. Absent is a true concern for personal responsibility and personal initiative, absent is authentic human freedom. Communism fell, he boldly asserted, because of a “rebellious man” who reclaimed his freedom, that is, reclaimed conscience in moral responsibility. The hero who overthrew communism was not a “man with growing needs” or a “consuming man” but a “responsibly free man.” Tischner warned that the same ruin could be inflicted anywhere this absence of conscience is embedded in the systems of economics, politics, and culture.

In his writing about solidarity Fr. Tischner noted that its founding was not only a social or economic event, but an ethical one. He said this because “the dignity of man is founded on his conscience. The deepest solidarity is the solidarity of conscience.”<sup>7</sup> Without conscience there is no solidarity. Conscience is “what is steady in man and what does not cause disappointment.” Conscience is prior to ethical system; it is a reality of the human person, emerging out of and therefore like intellect and will. One must exercise conscience, but one can stifle it. “Conscience is a voice that calls out within man. To what does it call us today? First, it calls us to want to have a conscience.” After years of socialist degradation of conscience, each person must reclaim their forgotten or semi-

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 324. Weigel found the citation in Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* (New Haven: Yale, 2002), 280. But see selections on solidarity and conscience from Tischner’s “Etyka solidarności,” in *Thinking in Values, The Tischner Institute Journal of Philosophy: Solidarity*, no. 1 (2007), 37–41. See also Adam Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Józef Tischner, “A View from the Ruins,” in *A New Worldly Order: John Paul II and Human Freedom*, ed. George Weigel (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992), 165–68.

<sup>7</sup> Józef Tischner “Etyka solidarności,” *Thinking in Values, The Tischner Institute Journal of Philosophy: Solidarity*, no. 1 (2007): 38.

forgotten conscience. And what better to call it forth than the natural bond with those who suffer. And in particular the superfluous suffering and the suffering of those who are maltreated and oppressed. The time was ripe in Poland in the 1980s. Tischner's attempts to mobilize the conscience of the nation arose from these truths: "Solidarity is founded on the conscience, and the stimulus for its growth is the cry of help from the man who has been hurt by another man."<sup>8</sup> John Paul II is rightly identified as the father of solidarity, this awakening of conscience and the bond of compassion. Tischner said that to be a father is to be the bearer of someone else's hope, or "the one who brings hope to a man is the spiritual father of this man."<sup>9</sup>

John Paul II wrote of the folly of realism and the exaltation of force over reason and law: "The events of 1989 are an example of the success of willingness to negotiate and of the Gospel spirit in the face of an adversary determined not to be bound by moral principles. These events are a warning to those who, in the name of political realism, wish to banish law and morality from the political arena."<sup>10</sup> Beyond this lesson in international relations and political philosophy John Paul II looked deeper for the "true cause" of the demise of the socialist system:

The true cause of the new developments was the spiritual void brought about by atheism, which deprived the younger generations of a sense of direction and in many cases led them, in the irrepressible search for personal identity and for the meaning of life, to rediscover the religious roots of their national cultures, and to rediscover the person of Christ himself as the existentially adequate response to the desire in every human heart for goodness, truth and life. This search was supported by the witness of those who, in difficult circumstances and under persecution, remained faithful to God. Marxism had promised to uproot the need for God from the human heart, but the results have shown that it is not possible to succeed in this without throwing the heart into turmoil. (*Centesimus Annus*, n. 24)

The formative factor was the awakening of conscience, but the existential influence of faith was most decisive: the downfall of the Soviet Union, he said,

was a struggle born of prayer, and it would have been unthinkable without immense trust in God, the Lord of history, who carries the human heart in his hands. It is by uniting his own sufferings for the sake of truth and freedom to the sufferings of Christ on the Cross that man is able to accomplish the miracle of peace and is in a position to discern the often narrow path between the cowardice which gives in to evil and the violence which, under the illusion of fighting evil, only makes it worse. (*Centesimus Annus*, n. 25)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 39–41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Centesimus Annus* § 25. Further references in the text.

These words set the context for John Paul II's explanation of conscience in the events of 1989 and the importance of conscience in political life.

In the general audience prior to the release of the encyclical, John Paul II summarized many of its important theses.

The Marxist system failed for the very reasons which *Rerum novarum* had already acutely and almost prophetically indicated. In this failure of an ideological and economic power which seemed destined to prevail over and even to root out the religious sense in human conscience, the church sees—beyond all social logical and political factors—the intervention of God's providence, which alone guides and governs history.<sup>11</sup>

Conscience is the voice of God in the human person. Conscience by definition appeals to a transcendent principle of morality. It is the discovery of the testimony of conscience that grounds human dignity. From conscience springs an authentic contribution through work to the common good. "We must renew the questions about social justice, about solidarity among working people, about the dignity of the human person; it means not to be resigned to exploitation and poverty, never to abandon the transcendent dimension of the person, who wants to [...] place his own work at the heart to building society." Through conscience we realize the twofold moral significance to property—the right to private property based on dignity of rational agent along with the universal destination of the world's resources for the sake of all people. "Economic freedom cannot be separated from other aspects of human freedom and the full realization of people in an authentic human community new individual ownership and the universal purpose of the world's resources must be acknowledged." In brief, the renewal of society must draw upon the depths of the human person. In addition to a free economy and a democratic participatory government, we must understand that "no free economy can function for long and respond to the conditions of a life more worthy of the human person, unless it's framed and solid legal and political structures, and above all, unless it is supported and enlivened by a strong ethical and religious conscience." Numerous commentators have pointed out that in this encyclical John Paul II distinguishes the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of human society. Each must be respected and given its due, with all proper recognition given to the priority of culture, as Weigel often urges. But we must also note that underneath them all is the free person, responsible to God in the realm of conscience.

---

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, "Confronting the Challenges of Our Time," General Audience, May 1, 1991. *L'Osservatore Romano*, May 6, 1991. Reprinted as "'As a Civilization of Solidarity and Love': An Invitation to *Centesimus Annus*," in *A New Worldly Order*, 23–28.

A great commitment on the political, economic, social, and cultural level is necessary to build a society that is more just and worthy of the human person. But this is not enough! A decisive commitment must be made to the very heart of man, to the intimacy of his conscience, where he makes his personal decisions. Only on this level can the human person effect a true, deep, and positive change in himself, and that is the undeniable premise of contributing to change and the improvement of all society.

It is in the light of the reawakening of conscience in solidarity that John Paul II speaks with hope of the prospect for the possibility of building “a more just and fraternal structures in the world for a new civilization—a civilization of solidarity and love.” But the crisis of our time is yet to be faced squarely. The crisis continues in western societies wherein the awareness of God is diminished and conscience darkened. A practical materialism continue to subvert the strength of a true culture. John Paul II’s revolution of conscience is still a revolution waiting to happen.

For this reason, we should see how he strategically deploys the notion of conscience in *Centesimus Annus* and develop a deeper appreciation for the primacy of the freedom of religion in contemporary society and political order.

## The Eight Uses Of Conscience in *Centesimus Annus*

There are eight places in the text wherein John Paul II uses the word conscience.<sup>12</sup> We will consider the context and the argument in which the term is used. We will look to see if there is any development or juxtaposition as he proceeds through the document.

Because the first uses of the term conscience are found in sections 15 & 16, we shall first consider the previous sections. In the introduction John Paul II explains the importance of *Rerum Novarum*—it is an immortal document because of the “vital energies rising from a root that are not spent” but have increased even more over the passing of the years. There is an inexhaustible

---

<sup>12</sup> We searched for the term conscience in the English text. The Latin text, or the French text, both use cognates of the term to mean awareness or responsibility according to the English translation. The use of the term awareness is not conscience as such, although awareness of a responsibility is very close to conscience as a principle of conscience. For the sake of a systematic examination, we will restrict ourselves to the eight uses in the English text, but we shall note some of the cognate uses as relevant to the argument in *Centesimus Annus*.

fecundity and energizing quality that characterizes the social doctrine of Pope Leo XIII. John Paul II found the great treasure or heritage of Catholic social doctrine extending from past through the present and into the promising future. This task of looking to the future, but acknowledging the past, now one hundred years, serves the purpose of “reawakening our responsibility” or “reawakening conscience” in order to “show the way, proclaim the truth, and to communicate the life which is Christ”<sup>13</sup> (*Centesimus Annus*, n. 3). Although not using the term conscience, John Paul II clearly indicates in the introduction to the encyclical that his purpose is to deepen our awareness of moral responsibility, that is to say, to stir or awaken the conscience of the reader. What is incorporated into the tradition served to inspire many millions of people as if constituting a “great movement for the defense of the human person and the safeguarding of human dignity.” We could say that John Paul II with this statement places *Rerum Novarum* in the broad ambit of the personalist movement and contributes to a personalist philosophy. As Jacques Maritain stated in the opening of his book *The Person and the Common Good*, personalism is not a doctrine but a reaction against two errors.<sup>14</sup> It is an aspiration or movement of people to find and build political society suitable for the flourishing of the human person. He queries whether society exists for each one of us, or does each one of us exist for society? Does the state exist for each one of us, or does each one of us exist for the state? He warns that a unilateral answer would plunge us into error: the anarchy of individualism (bourgeois liberalism) or the oppression of totalitarianism (communism and fascism). Maritain sought to develop a personalism rooted in the doctrine of St. Thomas on the dignity of the human person. Inspired by the work of Pope Leo XIII, Maritain also faced the existential problem of avoiding socialism and individualistic liberalism. The anchor for an adequate political philosophy and conceptualization of Catholic social teaching in the modern world is the dignity of the human person. As one who was actively present at Vatican II and who frequently cited *Gaudium et Spes* § 22 and § 24, Karol Wojtyła had a deep appreciation for the place of the dignity of the human person in the new evangelization. John Paul II ends the introduction by mentioning the need to advance the new evangelization from the lessons of 1989, namely a revolution of conscience.

Chapter one opens with a description of the “new things” that came into view in 1891, that is, the threat of new forms of injustice and servitude. A new economics and politics, called by Leo XIII “liberalism,” transformed soci-

---

<sup>13</sup> The latin text: Quae res et promissiones nostram mentem lacesunt vimque creatricem, nostrique tamquam ‘unici magistri’ Christi (cf. Mt 23, 8) discipulorum officii conscientiam excitant ut ‘viam’ monstremus, ‘veritatem’ profiteamur et ‘vitam’ quae Ipse est (cf. Io 14, 6) nuntiemus.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Person and the Common Good* (Notre Dame Press), chap. 1. See *Centesimus Annus*, n. 10.

ety through the commodification of labor and the neglect of the well-being, safety of the worker. A chasm divided the worker from the owners. Fueled by the deep inequality and the unjust treatment of the worker, socialism arose as a proposed remedy, a remedy worse than the disease. Pope Leo XIII insisted in *Libertas Praestantissimum* that liberty must be bound to the truth lest it fall into arbitrariness, passion, and ultimate self-destruction. The origin of all of the evils to which *Rerum Novarum* sought to respond is a “kind of freedom which cuts itself off from the truth about man.” Although John Paul II does not use the word conscience, obviously the root of the evil is the deformation and stifling of conscience, since moral truthfulness is the essential spring of conscience. In responsible action the agent seeks to know and to do the full truth about man.<sup>15</sup> Pope Leo XIII sought to find the basis for the unity of the human person and to heal the rift between the otherworldliness of the Christian and his worldly duties. The new situations must be met without degrading the human person’s transcendent dignity in oneself or one’s adversaries.<sup>16</sup> The rights of the human person formulate a measure for protecting the dignity of the person. John Paul II adumbrates various rights, which include the right to associate and the right to a just wage but also the inalienable right to Sabbath rest and an opportunity for religious practices. At the peak we find the right to religious freedom: “the right to discharge freely one’s religious duties” (n. 9).

The heart of his teaching, however, is the principle of solidarity. John Paul II treated of this virtue in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. Prior pontiffs have the term “friendship” (Leo XIII), “social charity” (Pius XI), or “civilization of love” (Paul VI). The guiding thread or principle of the work of Pope Leo XIII is “a correct view of the human person and of the person’s unique value, inasmuch as the human being ‘is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself’ [*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 24]. God has imprinted his own image and likeness on human beings (cf. Gen 1:26), conferring upon them an incomparable dignity.” John Paul II concludes chapter one with the claim that “beyond the rights which one acquires by one’s own work, there exist rights which do not correspond to any work performed, but which flow from one’s essential dignity as a person.”

Chapter two describes and analyzes the “new things of today (1991).” One hundred years later we return again to the problem of work and the oppression of the worker, but this time in the name of the worker’s party and the socialist ideology that claims to advance the working class. But the remedy is worse than the sickness. The abuse of human rights, the measure for political life today, became even worse. Here John Paul II identifies the chief error of socialism as an anthropological one. Not only does it suppress personal responsibility

<sup>15</sup> See Karol Wojtyła. *The Acting Person, Analecta Husserliana*, ed. and trans. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht/Boston: D. Reidel, 1979), chap. 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Centesimus. Annus*, n. 5.

and ownership, it warns against man's true social nature in the formation of intermediary groups. The first cause of the errors is its atheism. The reason this error is so deadly pertains to the oblivion to man's call to responsibility through conscience. John Paul II explains it as follows: "It is by responding to the call of God contained in the being of things that man becomes aware of his transcendent dignity. Every individual must give this response, which constitutes the apex of his humanity, and no social mechanism or collective subject can substitute for it. The denial of God deprives the person of his foundation, and consequently leads to a reorganization of the social order without reference to the person's dignity and responsibility" (*Centesimus Annus*, n. 13). Rather than to place man before God to learn the way of justice, socialism places class against class in mutual antagonism and hatred. The seeds of total war are planted, that realism of political Machiavellianism, that seeks violent and deceitful means to attain its righteous goal. Total war became the mindset of the nations during World War II as militarism and imperialism gripped most nations. The mindset of total war gave up the search for "a proper balance between the interests of the various nations" and replaced it with an attempt "to impose the absolute domination of one's own side through the destruction of the other side's capacity to resist, using every possible means, not excluding the use of lies, terror tactics against citizens, and weapons of utter destruction." John Paul II traces Marxism and militarism to the "same root, namely, atheism and contempt for the human person, which place the principle of force above that of reason and law" (*Centesimus Annus*, n. 14). We could say that Marxism and militarism destroyed the capacity of conscience and blocked the voice of conscience in the seeking of justice, and rationalized the unfettered use of power and violence to obtain its sanctified goals, an idol of human power. This brings us at last to uses of the term conscience in the encyclical. We will examine them as pairs in four groups: On Work, the rights of the worker, and Conscience (nn. 15–16); On conscience and true peace (nn. 19–23); On conscience and true freedom (nn. 26–29); and On conscience and the culture of social-political renewal (nn. 52–59).

### On Work, the Rights of the Worker, and Conscience (nn. 15–18)

The first two uses of the term conscience appear in sections 15 and 16 which concern Leo XIII's effort to find that position contrary to state control of the means of production, that is, socialism, and that form of liberalism which excludes the economic sector from the states range of interest in action. The just reforms that would restore dignity to work required the cooperation of both society and state. But the worker must be protected from unemployment and given adequate means to maintain the worker and his family. But in ad-

dition to these factors John Paul II spoke about “humane” working hours and adequate free time, as well as the right to express one’s own personality at the workplace without suffering any affront to one’s *conscience* or personal dignity. The worker is more than a producer and a consumer—but a human person who is called to participate in society, to share in the communications of knowledge and love—in this respect he says that the trade unions not only help to negotiate contracts but serve as places where workers can express themselves and communicate with others. As a responsible agent, the human person must act out of and from conscience, the source of their personal dignity. For that conscience to be nourished and activated a respect for the intellect and freedom of the person should be given its place in respect for its embodiment in a social context. Cardinal Wyszyński and Cardinal Wojtyła championed the cause of the worker to be granted time on Sunday to attend religious services.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, in this respect, John Paul II acknowledges that the worker as a person has a conscience and that conscientious work and speech must be given its due.

From the time of Leo XIII many reforms were carried out through the far-reaching influence of Catholic social teaching in the areas of Social Security, pensions, health insurance and compensation in the case of accidents, and a greater respect for the rights of workers generally. In the next section, John Paul II acknowledges the need for these reforms to be accomplished in part by the state, but there is no denial that the workers movement, the labor unions, were also important players in this achievement. The worker’s movement he describes as a response of moral conscience to unjust and harmful situations—at the urging of conscience there was a widespread campaign for reform not on the basis of vague ideology but arising from the daily needs and demands of the workers. It was this movement that became dominated or hijacked by Marxist ideology. But it was due to solidarity among the people that cooperatives were established, education and professional training were made available, and an encouragement for participation of the worker in the life of the workplace and in society were promoted. So in this case the term conscience refers to the active subject who possesses conscience and is capable of initiative and cooperative action with others. Conscience is the spring of authentic reform.

In section 17 and 18, John Paul II returns to the deep theme of the essential error concerning conscience. “This error consists in an understanding of human freedom which detaches it from obedience to the truth, and consequently from the duty to respect the rights of others” (*Centesimus Annus*, nn. 17–18). Echoing Augustine’s *City of God*, Leo XIII criticizes the notion of freedom detached from truth as a form of self-love carried to the point of contempt for God and

---

<sup>17</sup> Stefan Wyszyński, *All You Who Labor: Work and Sanctification of Daily Life* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Press, 1995). Translation of *Duch Pracy Ludzkiej* (1946).

neighbor; it leads to an unbridled affirmation of self-interest and refuses to acknowledge the demands of justice. John Paul II considered Leo XIII a prophetic voice because that very error lay behind the world wars of the 20th century. The terrible burden of hatred and resentment arose out of so many injustices and ideologies, sanctioned and organized hatred, and injustice about man and the dignity of conscience. Entire nations were pulled in by these ideologies of hatred that justified violence.

The post-World War II period failed to remove the causes of war, nor did it achieve an effective genuine reconciliation between people. The world's situation was more that of "non-war" rather than genuine peace. If half of the continent of Europe fell under the domination of the communist dictatorship, a suffocation of their historical memory and the roots of their culture came about. In order to counter this threat an arms race swallowed up resources needed for national economies and development. Scientific and technological progress was transformed into an instrument of war. In that persistent ideology of human power the philosophy of total war prevailed. And now with the threat of atomic war that could lead to the extinction of humanity because science used for military purposes has placed this instrument at the disposal of hatred strengthened by ideology. It has become the time to repudiate the concept of total war and the concept of class struggle must be called into question. Would this account John Paul II advanced is the timeline to better appreciate the events of 1989 and the role of conscience in bringing forth those events.

## On Conscience and True Peace (nn. 19–23)

Section 19 opens with the judgment that due to a deep germination of consciences at the end of World War II many repudiated the logic of total war and rejected totalitarian ideology. Through the cooperation of the United States, the nations of free Europe made efforts to rebuild democratic societies with a respect for social justice. The grievances of the worker should no longer be a source for communist manipulation. Efforts were made to subject the market mechanisms to public control in order "to deliver work from the mere conditions of 'a commodity' and to guarantee its dignity." While recognizing and applauding the tremendous advances of the dignity of work in Europe, John Paul II also noted the social forces and ideological movements which emphasized national security, favored an increase in the power of the state, thereby risking the value of freedom and the value of the person. In addition, the generation of great affluence and the rise of the consumer society leads to another form of reductionism—a reduction of man to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs. It would be folly to think that Marxism could be

defeated on the level of productivity alone, that obtaining greater satisfaction of material human needs would be sufficient for the liberation of the human person. The remarks by Józef Tischner about the reason people turned against socialism in Poland are a reminder of the priority of spirit over matter. So the awakening of conscience after World War II turned out to be somewhat weak and precarious for the reasons that the Communist bloc made every effort to stifle and suppress it and the block of free nations more often diverted from the claims of conscience because of national security and the rise of consumerism. In the Third World most countries were unable to rise to the occasion of building a democratic society and prosperous economy on the basis of their newfound freedom from colonial rule. John Paul II considers one of the great achievements of humanity after World War II was the deepening respect for human rights embodied in a number of international documents to affirm the rights of individuals and the rights of nations. We must mention the work of Jacques Maritain in the drafting of the first international United Nations charter of human rights. The discrepancy between the proclamation of rights and the policies and practices of most nation-states is one of the great tensions and signs of the times that John Paul II picks up in *Redemptor Hominis*, as well as in his many speeches at the United Nations. And still the imbalance of policies for the aid for development, he says, has not always been positive and we are still without effective means of resolution of international conflicts. On this note of hope, realistic, however, about the continuing challenges to the awakening of conscience in social and political life, John Paul II ends chapter 2.

Chapter 3 is entitled “The Year 1989.” John Paul II considers 1989 to be the culminating period of the new movement to defend and promote the dignity of the person and human rights. This is the revolution of conscience. A decisive contribution was made by the Church and its commitment to defend and promote human rights and to discover political solutions more respectful of the dignity of the person. This happened in central Europe, but also in some countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The violation of the rights of workers weighed heavily in the fall of oppressive regimes. It was particularly striking that there was a crisis in the socialist system which claim to express the rule of the working class that led to the rise of solidarity, protest, and a transformation of the political system. A sign of conscience at work was the fact that the means of resistance were peaceful protests that made use only of the weapons of truth and justice. Unlike the Marxist who sought to promote the resolution of conflicts by violent confrontation, the Solidarity movement in Poland insisted on “negotiation, dialogue, and witness to truth, appealing to the conscience of the adversary and seeking to reawaken in him a sense of shared human dignity” (*Centesimus Annus*, n. 23). John Paul II considers it remarkable that the Yalta agreement was not overturned by another war but by a nonviolent commitment of people who found the most effective way of bearing witness to truth. It was

a revolution of the spirit and he thanks God to sustain people's hearts amid difficult trials. It is a lesson for people to learn to fight for justice without violence.

## On Conscience and True Freedom (nn. 26–29)

In the next two uses of the term conscience John Paul II develops the sweep of the term as it arises out of the revolution of 1989 in the initiatives to protect the rights of workers to the larger question posed in section 26 of the true liberation of the person and the meaning and dignity of work. In section 29 the deepest level of conscience is to be discovered in the vocation of the human person to seek God, to know him, and to live in accord with that knowledge.

The events of 1989 “have worldwide importance because they have positive and negative consequences which concern the whole human family.” There is a providential dimension to the events precisely because they arose from the awakening of conscience in many persons throughout Central and Eastern Europe and such actions so deeply rooted in personal freedom, were not “mechanistic or fatalistic in character” but were examples of human freedom cooperating “with the merciful plan of God who acts within history” (n. 26). Providence is greater than force and violence. The Church, in its encounter with the worker's movement, stirred the consciences of many of the workers and provided an alternative to the materialistic and reductive theories of the dominant Marxist power. Thus, in response to the crisis of Marxism “the natural dictates of the consciences of workers have re-emerged in a demand for justice and a recognition of the dignity of work” (n. 26). But the precepts of the natural dictates of conscience extend beyond work to the integral flourishing of the person. It led to a comprehensive consideration of and demand for “the liberation of the human person and for the affirmation of human rights” (n. 26). This movement drew upon Catholic social doctrine, post war declarations of human rights and it found a ready echo and response in many countries and regions of the world.

The revolution of conscience is a comprehensive one not only its global repercussions but also because of the integral humanism that must undergird the full account of human rights. If indeed “development must not be understood solely in economic terms, but in a way that is fully human” (n. 29), then all human workers and all human beings must be brought within the concern for the dignity of the person and for effort of their behalf for human development. At the center of this concern and this development must be especially the “capacity to respond to his personal vocation, and thus to God's call” (n. 29). Using the great encyclical of his predecessor Pope Paul VI, *On the Development of Peoples*, he draws out the core truth of the revolution of conscience: “The apex of development is the exercise of the right and duty to seek God, to know him and to live in accordance with that knowledge” (n. 29). This truth stands in

complete opposition to Marxism with its totalitarian attempts to use force and impose a rigid and oppressive ideology to compel the human person to submit without regard for the understanding and freedom of its citizens. The oppression of conscience and the principle of state control and coercion of the person's moral freedom "must be overturned and total recognition must be given to *the rights of the human conscience*, which is bound only to the truth, both natural and revealed" (n. 29). In this section John Paul II states what is a fundamental principle of his social and political philosophy: "The recognition of these rights represents the primary foundation of every authentically free political order" (n. 29). Freedom of conscience must become more deeply understood and affirmed, in law as well as philosophy, because totalitarian and authoritarian forms of government continue to hold sway in many places and in other regions forms of religious fundamentalism oppress the citizens of other faiths by denying them the full exercise of their civil and religious rights. And even in the free countries in the west the promotion of purely utilitarian values and a hedonistic measure of the good make it difficult to "recognize and respect the hierarchy of the true values of human existence" (n. 29). The false claims of "neutrality" in public sphere lead to an increasing limitation of the voice and the actions of the citizens of faith.

### On Conscience and the Culture of Social-Political Renewal (nn. 52–59)

The last two uses of the term conscience establish some critical ideas needed for the principles of the revolution of conscience to reach a more durable, widespread and global influence for social-political renewal. War as a means to resolve conflict remains the most vexing problem. War, a scourge on mankind from time immemorial, became a means of ideology and hate, a total war against the person. In the 20th century all the pontiffs have made efforts to bring reconciliation to the nations. In our day John Paul II appealed to the revolution of conscience and promoted its global appreciation. The first step in this direction must be the abandonment of the philosophy of total war derived from hypernationalism, Machiavellian reasons of state, and ideologies of hatred and contempt for the human person. In addition, the nations must understand the plea of Pope Paul VI that development is another name for peace. The rich nations must deepen their awareness of responsibility in solidarity for the less developed nations and assume greater responsibility. But he says, "As there is a collective responsibility for avoiding war, so too there is a collective responsibility for promoting development" (n. 52). And in light of the universal destination of goods, and an analogical common good for all nations, "there is a similar need for adequate interventions on the international level" (n. 52). For any of

these steps to gain traction and adherence “a great effort must be made to enhance mutual understanding and knowledge, and to increase the sensitivity of consciences” (n. 52). Renewal is at the core a cultural matter, and the deepest strata of culture is that of conscience. We are reminded of John Paul II’s first encyclical and his call for the priority of the person over things, the priority of spirit over matter, and the priority of ethics over technology.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, to complete his treatment of conscience in the light of the events of 1989, John Paul II reminds the reader that conscience as classically considered by Thomas Aquinas has a “practical and as it were experiential dimension” because it is “found at the crossroads where Christian life and conscience come into contact with the real world” (n. 59). It is not a teaching of empty wish or a dreamy idealism. This fruitfulness of this teaching may be found and verified in the “efforts of individuals, families, people involved in cultural and social life, as well as politicians and statesmen to give it a concrete form and application in history” (n. 52). Conscience draws upon both the natural light of reason and supernatural inspiration and infusion of supernatural virtues and gifts. We must not neglect the gift of grace in the events of 1989 and in our hope for the future. Needed most of all for political renewal is the order of grace: “[...] in order that the demands of justice may be met, and attempts to achieve this goal may succeed, what is needed is *the gift of grace, a gift* which comes from God. Grace, in cooperation with human freedom, constitutes that mysterious presence of God in history which is Providence” (n. 59, italics original). The challenges of renewal of social and political life fall upon the laity who combine newness of life derived from baptism and their character of secularity, being responsible for temporal affairs. The Church becomes the Mother of the revolution of conscience through the sacraments and the catechetical formation of the laity. Thus John Paul II stresses the need for the renewal of grace:

The newness which is experienced in following Christ demands to be communicated to other people in their concrete difficulties, struggles, problems and challenges, so that these can then be illuminated and made more human in the light of faith. Faith not only helps people to find solutions; it makes even situations of suffering humanly bearable, so that in these situations people will not become lost or forget their dignity and vocation. (n. 59)

---

<sup>18</sup> John Hittinger, “The Springs of Religious Freedom: Conscience and the Search for Truth,” *Journal of Disciplinary Studies* 29, no. 1/2 (2017): 4–24.

## Conclusion

# Four Rings of Freedom of Conscience and Religion

John Paul II's uses of the term conscience in *Centesimus Annus* builds a coherent and compelling account of the revolution of conscience in the events of 1989; it establishes lessons that must be applied to social and political life today. Although the uses of the term conscience are scattered throughout the text and may appear unsystematic, I think that we can discern a pattern to his teaching on conscience in social and political affairs. We discern four levels, or rings of freedom of conscience: the political-juridical, the cultural or educational, the social-religious, and the personal-religious circles for the flourishing of conscience.

The outer circle—the political-juridical zone—requires a public commitment and constitutional protection for freedom of conscience and religion. Within the framework of the common good, a wide protection must be afforded to freedom of conscience. That is, the state does not take responsibility for the consciences of others; it does not coerce belief or behavior based upon ideological or religious truth. This zone of freedom is consistent with the dignity of the person and the notion of a free citizen. The truths of morality and religion should elicit a response of freedom based upon understanding and inner persuasion. This right was neglected and suppressed by the totalitarian regimes. In the West, there are some who seek to relativize religious and moral truth in order to protect freedom of conscience. But the zone of religious freedom is not simply prizing an ability to simply opt out or to be indifferent to the truths of morality and religion. That is why a second circle of religious freedom comes into play—the educational and cultural.

Religion requires a search for God, and the formation of conscience. The person needs educational opportunities to learn faith, to seek understanding, and to have the freedom to pursue and affirm, or forswear, a given belief. The attempt for a state ideology to fill this zone with dogmatic and coercive teaching is wrong and counterproductive.

The third level or circle of freedom of conscience requires the freedom for association of the Church and other religious groups. The religious beliefs must be allowed social organization and social expression. The dictates of conscience must be embodied in social life and through various free associations to pursue the good.

The inner core of the freedom of conscience must be that of the individual person. As John Paul II stated in his encyclical, each person stands before God and assumes responsibility for the good or evil of their own deeds. In the sphere

of personal conscience there arises the movement towards repentance and conversion, but also the sphere of betrayal and degradation.

Giacomo Cardinal Biffi, in an essay “The Action of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the World,” wisely notes that “a human being’s radical disintegration starts in the conscience when it claims to set itself up as an interior tribunal liberated from any objective norm of behavior.”<sup>19</sup> In *Veritatis Splendor* John Paul II describes conscience as the “sanctuary of God” in the human person. In 1983, Pope John Paul II said, “Moral conscience does not close man within an insurmountable and impenetrable solitude, but opens him to the call, to the voice of God. In this, and not in anything else, lies the entire mystery and the dignity of the moral conscience: in being the place, the sacred place where God speaks to man” (General Audience, 17 August 1983). He repeats this statement in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. Conscience is not so much a “process of moral reasoning” or a moral syllogism or self-reflection, but primarily a “dialogue of man with God.” The protection of religious freedom, or the right to conscience, is a protection of the deepest “sanctuary” in the person, the aspect that defines the person as a person, not as a creator of value, but as the one capable of responding to God. He reminds us that “St. Bonaventure teaches that ‘conscience is like God’s herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God’s authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience has binding force’” (*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 58). We listen and we receive something in this sanctuary. In order to protect this sanctuary we need the action of the Church, the opportunities for educational formation and cultural expression as well as the protection of the law.

The revolution of conscience begins within the innermost circle or sphere of personal conscience and radiates outward through associations, culture, and the political order itself. We are in debt to Pope John Paul II for contributing to the revolution of conscience in Poland and worldwide and for providing this compelling account of the events of 1989.

## Bibliography

- Biffi, Giacomo. “The Action of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the World.” In *John Paul II: A Panorama of His Teachings*, 18–47. New York: New York City Press, 1989.
- Conley, John J. 1999. “Anatomy of Conscience: A Reading of *Veritatis Splendor*.” In *Prophecy and Diplomacy: The Moral Doctrine of John Paul II*, edited by John J. and Joseph W. Koterski Conley. New York: Fordam University Press.

---

<sup>19</sup> Giacomo Biffi, “The Action of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the World,” in *John Paul II: A Panorama of his teachings* (New York: New York City Press, 1989), 42.

- Dupuy, André (ed.). *Pope John Paul II and the Challenges of Papal Diplomacy: Anthology, 1978–2003*. Vatican City & New York: Catholic Church. Pontificia Commissio Iustitia et Pax., and Path to Peace Foundation, 2004.
- John Paul II. 1979. *Address to the XXXIV General Assembly of the United Nations*. Boston, MA: St. Paul Editions.
- John Paul II. 1980. *The Freedom of Conscience and of Religion*. Boston, M.A.: St. Paul Editions.
- John Paul II. 1998. *Respect for Human Rights: The Secret of True Peace*. In *USCC*, edited by World Day of Peace. Washington, D.C.: USCC.
- John Paul II and Catholic Church. Pontificia commissio Iustitia et Pax. 1981. *Religious Freedom and the Helsinki Final Act: Supplement to No. 3 of the Series: The Social Teaching of John Paul II*. Vatican City: Pontifical commission "Iustitia et Pax."
- John Paul II. Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 1991.
- John Paul II. "Confronting the Challenges of Our Time," General Audience, May 1, 1991. *L'Osservatore Romano*, May 6, 1991. Reprinted as "'As a Civilization of Solidarity and Love': An Invitation to *Centesimus Annus*" In *A New Worldly Order*, 23–28
- Hittinger, John P. "The Springs of Religious Freedom: Conscience and the Search for Truth." *Journal of Disciplinary Studies* 29, no. 1/2 (2017): 4–24.
- Hittinger, John P. *Liberty, Wisdom and Grace: Thomism and Modern Democratic Theory*. Lanham, MD.: Lexington Press, 2002.
- Hittinger John P., "On the Right of Conscience." In *Art and Reality*. Edited by Andrzej Maryniarczyk et al., 423–434. Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2014.
- Hittinger, John P. "Gaudium et spes and the Importance of Political Philosophy." *Pontifical College Josephinum Journal of Theology* 20.2 (Aquinas and the Philosophical Training of Theologians): 279–306. 2015 (2013).
- Hittinger, John P. "'Private Ownership, Common Use,' Aquinas and Maritain on Aristotle's Politics." In *Property as a Condition of Liberty (Das Eigentum Als Eine Bedingung Der Freiheit)*. Edited by Anton Rauscher, 22, 91–107. Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 2013.
- Hittinger, John P., "The Roots of the Doctrine of Religious Toleration." In *Toleranz und Menschenwürde/Tolerance and Human Dignity*. Edited by Anton Rauscher, 21, 105–129. Munich: Soziale Orientierung, 2011.
- Hittinger, John P. "Responsibility of the University in the Modern World." In *Responsibility: Recognition and Limits*. Edited by Anton Rauscher, 20, 349–368. Munich: Soziale Orientierung, 2010.
- Hittinger, John P. "On Citizen and Conscience: Political Participation in *Gaudium et Spes*." In *Nationale Und Kulturelle Identitat Im Zeitalter Der Globalisierung*. Edited by Anton Rauscher. Munich: Soziale Orientierung, 2006.
- Hittinger, John P. "The Cooperation of Church and State: Maritain's Argument from the Unity of the Person." In *Reassessing the Liberal State: Reading Maritain's Man and the State*. Edited by John P. Hittinger and Timothy Fuller. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2001.
- Maritain, Jacques. *Person and the Common Good*. Translated by John J. Fitzgerald. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1966. Weigel, George. *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*. New York Harper Perennial, 1999.
- Weigel, George. *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II—The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy*. Doubleday, 2010.
- Weigel, George. *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism*. Oxford University Press 1992.
- Weigel, George. *The Courage to Be Catholic: Crisis, Reform, and the Future of the Church*. Basic Books, 2002.

- Wyszyński, Stefan. *All You Who Labor: Work and Sanctification of Daily Life*. Manchester, NH: Sophia Press, 1995. Translation of *Duch Pracy Ludzkiej* (1946).
- Tischner, Josef. "Etyka solidarności." In *Thinking in Values, The Tischner Institute Journal of Philosophy: Solidarity*, no. 1 (2007): 37–41.
- Tischner, Józef. "A View from the Ruins." In *A New Worldly Order: John Paul II and Human Freedom*. Edited by George Weigel, 165–168. Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992.
- Michnik, Adam. *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

John P. Hittinger

## La révolution de la conscience dans *Centesimus Annus*

### Résumé

L'article examine différentes façons d'appliquer le terme de «conscience» dans *Centesimus Annus*. En l'occurrence, il explique la notion de la «révolution de conscience». L'omission du rôle de la conscience dans la politique et dans la pratique de vie ainsi que le manque de respect des droits de l'homme sont des raisons essentielles de la chute de l'Union soviétique. L'article analyse et démontre quatre différentes sphères de la liberté de conscience et de religion présentes dans *Centesimus Annus*.

Mots clés : conscience, révolution de 1989, Léon XIII, droits des ouvriers, communisme

John P. Hittinger

## La rivoluzione della coscienza nella *Centesimus Annus*

### Sommario

L'articolo esamina i diversi modi di usare il termine "coscienza" nella *Centesimus Annus*. In tal modo chiarisce il concetto di "rivoluzione della coscienza". L'omissione del ruolo della coscienza nella politica e nella prassi di vita nonché la mancanza di rispetto dei diritti umani sono le cause rilevanti della caduta dell'Unione Sovietica. L'articolo analizza e indica quattro diverse sfere della libertà di coscienza e di religione presenti nella *Centesimus Annus*.

Parole chiave: coscienza, rivoluzione del 1989, Leone XIII, diritti dei lavoratori, comunismo, solidarietà