

IB EXTENDED ESSAY

John Paul II's Influences and the Fall of European Communism

Research Question: What influenced pope John Paul II to be so instrumental in the fall of communism in 20th century Europe?

IB Subject: World Religions

Personal Code: ftr757

Session: May 2017

Word Count: 3,327

Abstract:

John Paul II began his priesthood in 1946 and was elected pope in 1978. Throughout his clerical life, he spoke out against communism around the world, especially in Europe. John Paul II was a highly educated man and a very intellectual thinker. Because he lived under the Polish communist regime for a majority of his early life, he understood the hardships of life under a communist regime. Perhaps because of this, his writings focused extensively on the value of the human person and the relationship between the individual and his society.

John Paul II wrote many encyclicals about the inherent value and dignity of the human person. He used biblical references and church teachings to demonstrate that the dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God. He also wrote about the value of personal freedom, that every person has the opportunity to find fulfillment in the love of Christ. Each person should be able to express this love freely. John Paul II emphasized that labor should be the means to personal and spiritual fulfillment. It should not be the end of human life or dehumanizing.

The teachings of John Paul II directly opposed the principals of communist regimes and it is through his religious and political activism that he was able to enact major social change throughout Europe. He supported anti-communist activists and promoted social equality through his writing, speeches, and other works during his papacy. His understanding of the value of human life, freedom, and work influenced the end of communism in Europe.

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Introduction:

Pope John Paul II (né Karol Wojtyła) was born in Wadowice, Poland on May 18, 1920. After suffering the loss of his older brother and mother fairly young, his father raised him.¹ Devoutly Catholic, the two attended mass daily. During his youth and early adulthood, Karol Wojtyła was very passionate about acting and participated in many theatre clubs. He studied Philosophy at Jagiellonian University until the incoming German communist regime closed the University. Soon after, he was forced to work in a quarry to provide for his aging father.² His Catholic faith had always been a main focus of his life.³ He began seminary studies underground, as religious practice had already been limited even before the official communist regime officially began in 1946.⁴ A year after the regime began, at age 26, Wojtyła was ordained a priest. The Bishop assigned Wojtyła to his first parish in Niegowic. He earned his first doctorate in sacred teachings and by January of 1954, he had earned his second doctorate in philosophy.^{5,6} These prestigious degrees inspired much of his academic and theological writings. In 1958, Wojtyła became auxiliary Bishop of Krakow. Five years later the pope named him Archbishop of Krakow.⁷ In 1967, Wojtyła became a cardinal and on October 16, 1978, the College of Cardinals elected him pope, where he took the name John Paul II.⁸ In the years leading up to his papal election, John Paul II focused heavily on the ethics of love, sexuality, family life and the responsibility therein.⁹ His research and personal experience garnered throughout his clerical life

¹ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Harper, 1999), 18.

² Jason Evert, *Saint John Paul the Great: His Five Loves* (n.p.: Totus Tuus Press, 2014), 10.

³ *Ibid*, 13-14.

⁴ Evert, *Saint John*, 23.

⁵ CNN Library, "Pope John Paul II Fast Facts," CNN, last modified April 28, 2014, accessed September 25, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/02/world/pope-john-paul-ii-fast-facts/>.

⁶ Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 122.

⁷ *Ibid*, 143.

⁸ Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 235.

⁹ Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 181-235.

influenced his deep understanding of the Church's teachings on the inherent value of the human person, and his own personal experience with communist regimes highly impacted his chosen areas of study.

What influenced pope John Paul II to be so instrumental in the fall of communism in 20th century Europe? John Paul II's own experience had influence on his prioritization of the fall of communism in 20th century Europe; however, it seems to be his knowledge and understanding of the Catholic Church, biblical interpretations, and deep love for Jesus Christ that influenced his promotion of social welfare. John Paul II achieved this through his teaching and activism on the value and dignity of the human life, the value of freedom, and the value of work.

The inherent value and dignity of human life was central to John Paul II's social teaching and activism; which he wrote about in many forms throughout his priesthood and papacy. His writings are based off biblical and church teaching. His teachings conflicted with communism which equated each person's value with their societal productivity¹⁰. John Paul II cited each person's worth as a measure of their God given dignity. John Paul II emphasized that a result of the inherent dignity of the person, regardless of their ability or societal usefulness, is freedom. Human must have the right to act in accord with their dignity and to choose what to believe and even more importantly, how to live those beliefs. Communist regimes denied people the right to live out their faith, and often deported priests to concentration camps, shut down seminaries, and abolished other religious practices such as Holy Mass and other sacraments.¹¹ Finally, John Paul II stressed the importance of labor and work. He stressed the importance of work as being not

¹⁰ Maurice Cornforth, *Communism and Human Values* (n.p.: International Publishers, 1972), 54.

¹¹ Evert, *Saint John*, 25.

merely productive, but also as being fulfilling to the core of the human person whereas communism regimes reduced personhood to the ability to produce goods. ¹²

I. “...every human being is endowed with a dignity that must never be lessened, impaired or destroyed but must instead be respected and safeguarded...”

~John Paul II

Human life is inherently valuable because it is an affirmation of God’s love for his people. ¹³ John Paul II knew this and made it a central focus to his social teaching and activism. He believed that life is valuable because, at its most basic level, it shows God’s love for us. According to Genesis, “God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them...”. ¹⁴ God created man in his image, and thus man is, in some way, a reflection of the Divine. ¹⁵ In his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II writes, “Man has been given a *sublime dignity*, based on the intimate bond which unites him to his Creator: in man there shines forth a reflection of God himself”. ¹⁶ He explains that the book of Genesis develops this idea by showing how mankind is the pinnacle of creation and is given dominion over the animals. ¹⁷ From this he affirms ‘the primacy of man over things,’ and that because of this primacy, no human can be subject to another or be “reduced to the level of a thing”. ^{18,19} The life that God gives to man is valuable because it is God sharing a piece of himself with each individual person. After the creation of the world, God looks at His creation and declares it good²⁰. Life is the ultimate good, because it is the ultimate gift from a loving Creator who created humans out of his

¹² John Paul, *Encyclical Letter on Human Work =: Laborem Exercens : on the Ninetieth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 1981).

¹³ John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life: Evangelium Vitae : Encyclical Letter*(Boston, PA: Pauline Books and Media, 1995), 13.

¹⁴ Genesis 1:27; New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE)

¹⁵ John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life: Evangelium Vitae : Encyclical Letter*(Boston, PA: Pauline Books and Media, 1995), 13.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *The Gospel*, 54.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *The Gospel*, 55.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gen 1:31; NABRE.

own goodness.²¹ Furthermore, John Paul II recognized that human dignity is confirmed again when God is made incarnate in Jesus Christ.²² God “so loved the world that he gave his only Son”²³, and God again affirms the value of human life. “[God] proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died to save us”.²⁴ God was willing to send down yet another piece of himself, fully God and fully man, so that people might “have life and have it more abundantly”.^{25,26,27} John Paul II expresses that these acts of love for the human race show the value of the human person. John Paul II believed in the value of every human life and it permeated every aspect of his life before and during his papacy.

John Paul II promoted this ideal because human life is the basis of every social interaction between persons as well as between governments and their people.

“It is therefore urgently necessary, for the future of society and the development of a sound democracy, to rediscover those essential and innate human and moral values which flow from the very truth of the human being and express and safeguard the dignity of the person: values which no individual, no majority and no State can ever create, modify or destroy, but must only acknowledge, respect and promote”.²⁸

John Paul II relied on St Thomas Aquinas’ words to sum up his thoughts on civil law and government:

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 425.

²² John Paul II, *The Gospel*, 63.

²³ John 3:16, NABRE.

²⁴ Romans 5:8, NABRE.

²⁵ John 10:10, NABRE.

²⁶ Catholic Church, "*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*," Vatican Archive, last modified 1965, accessed October 23, 2016.

²⁷ John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life: Evangelium Vitae : Encyclical Letter*(Boston, PA: Pauline Books and Media, 1995).

²⁸ John Paul II, *The Gospel*, 116.

“Every law made by man can be called a law insofar as it derives from the natural law. But if it is somehow opposed to the natural law, then it is not really a law but rather a corruption of the law”.²⁹ “The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men. It expresses the dignity of the person and determines the basis for his fundamental rights and duties...[and is] nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God”.³⁰

He felt that the purpose of civil law was to uphold moral law as well as to uphold natural law, such as the right to life.³¹ The right to life is a natural law and therefore must be upheld by the government. These thoughts influenced much of Pope John Paul II’s writings.

John Paul II was very active in promoting this view of the sanctity of human life throughout his life, although each of his encyclicals written about people is based on the principle.³² He aided in the writing of *Gaudium et Spes*, one of the official documents written at the Second Vatican Council, which focuses on the church in the modern world and what actions it must take to uphold the right to life.³³ However, his view on the equality of peoples dates back to his early life. During his early priesthood, he established himself as a servant to the community he ministered to. He traveled long distances to meet with families, and established elementary schools as well as other afterschool activities for children and adults to grow spiritually. He did this while under the communist regime, which strictly forbade such

²⁹ Ibid., 118.

³⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic*, 493.

³¹ Ibid., 117.

³² EWTN, "Encyclical Titles," EWTN.com, accessed October 23, 2016, <https://www.ewtn.com/johnpaul2/writings/encyclicals.htm>.

³³ Pope John Paul II, "Gaudium et Spes Speech," Vatican.va, accessed October 23, 2016, http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01051997_p-28_en.html.

pastimes.³⁴ In Poland, he sacrificed his safety so that each person could be properly ministered to and taken care of. Such selfless love stemmed from his own conviction that each person deserved any time he could give them because every person was an image of God and therefore valuable.³⁵ He lived his life in contrast to communist regimes, which reduced people's value to their societal usefulness.

II. “Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.”
~John Paul II

Directly related to the value of human beings is human freedom.³⁶

“Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one's own responsibility. By free will one shapes one's own life. Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude”.³⁷

Because human are created in the image and likeness of God, they are endowed with “spiritual facilities which are distinctively human, such as reason, discernment between good and evil, and free will”.³⁸ He cites a scripture passage which states “With knowledge and understanding he filled them; good and evil he showed them”.³⁹ John Paul I writes that because humanity has been endowed with the ability to ascertain truth through reason and free will and thus the ability to “attain truth and freedom are human prerogatives inasmuch as man is created in the image of his Creator, God, who is true and just”.⁴⁰ Therefore, because humans are a reflection of God, possess the unique ability to ascertain truth, and tell right from wrong, there is a freedom that is given them. John Paul II acknowledges that human are given free will, thus they are given the

³⁴ Ibid., 32.

³⁵ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Harper, 1999).

³⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic*, 442.

³⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic*, 448.

³⁸ John Paul II, *The Gospel*, 60.

³⁹ Ben Sira 17:7 (NABRE).

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *The Gospel*, 60.

freedom to choose right or wrong.⁴¹ Because God is good, choosing the good will lead to God, and thus the fullness of freedom is realized as it is directed towards God. John Paul II's writing coincide with the Catechism of the Catholic Church which states, "By free will, he [the human being] is capable of directing himself toward his true good. He finds his perfection 'in seeking and loving what is true and good'" .^{42,43}

Furthermore, because every human life is valuable equally,

"Every human person... has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other the duty of this respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person. This right must be recognized and protected by civil authority within the limits of the common good and public order".⁴⁴

These are rights endowed by the creator simply because of every person's humanity. John Paul II writes again in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* that the maintenance and protection of every person's freedoms is beautiful. No human being should be forced to act against his own conscience because to do so would counter the natural value of the human person whose dignity allows the person to assent to the divine truth. "Freedom consists not in doing what we like," John Paul II said, "but in having the right to do what we ought".⁴⁵ He believed very heavily because of all that the church teaches that freedom to choose is a fundamental right that should be afforded to all people. Perhaps because of his own personal experience with communist

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² *Catechism of the Catholic*, 443.

⁴³ Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican City, Vatican: n.p., 1965), [Page #], accessed October 28, 2016, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁴⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic*, 449.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, "Homily of His Holiness John Paul II" (speech, Oriole Park at Camden Yards, Baltimore, MD, October 8, 1995).

regimes that make the practice of religion dangerous and very nearly impossible, he fought vigorously to uphold the fundamental rights to freedom. He encouraged people, especially Poles who were still suffering under the communist regime, to fight against their oppressors and not to lose hope. Throughout his priesthood he fought against communism to uphold personal freedoms and safeguard the value of life.

III. “It must be said over and over again that work is for man, not man for work...The worker is always more important than profits and machines.”

~John Paul II

In order to understand the value of work and why John Paul II prioritized this aspect of humanity in his anti-communist fight, it is important to know how communist regimes in 20th century Europe treated work in relation to the human being. Marx and Engels, the father figures of communism, wrote that communism would remove the inequality from the workforce. They would do this by equalizing all work so that each receives according to their need from the communal work they performed.⁴⁶ In practice however, because every commodity is equalized, the economy often suffers from shortages of food and other commercially produced resources. Along with product shortages, the value of each person equals their level of production. Working conditions were often atrocious, and John Paul II experienced this first hand in his work in the polish mines.⁴⁷ This experience with work under a communist regime may have influenced him to write *Laborem Exercens*, an encyclical on the value of human work.

John Paul II recognized work as the fundamental good of a society, because it is upon work that new technologies develop and civilizations advance. “...man's life is built up every day from work, from work it derives its specific dignity, but at the same time work contains the

⁴⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto* (Moscow, Russia: Progress Publishers, 1969), [Page #], accessed October 30, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>.

⁴⁷ Evert, *Saint John*, 20.

unceasing measure of human toil and suffering, and also of the harm and injustice which penetrate deeply into social life within individual nations and on the international level”.⁴⁸ In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II points to a key biblical passage: “Be fruitful and *multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it*”.⁴⁹ John Paul II explains,

“The expression ‘subdue the earth’ has an immense range. It means all the resources that the earth (and indirectly the visible world) contains and which, through the conscious activity of man, can be discovered and used for his ends”.⁵⁰

He continues, pointing out that although the words ‘subdue it’ do not refer directly to work, they are undoubtedly alluding to the work which mankind will carry out in the world. Man, because he is created in God’s image, reflects the actions of the Creator when he works, and thus is meant to work with a certain purpose, not fruitlessly or frivolously⁵¹. Man is made for union with God, and it is often through work that man reaches fulfillment in terms of an earthly purpose, which, when correctly discerned, will help man on his path to heaven⁵². “As a person he[mankind] works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity”⁵³.

John Paul II recognizes that because of man’s dignity, he is called to work that is not merely productive in an earthly sense, but which also draws him to a closer union with God and

⁴⁸ John Paul, *Encyclical Letter on Human Work =: Laborem Exercens : on the Ninetieth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 1981).

⁴⁹ Gen 1:28 (NABRE)

⁵⁰ John Paul, *Encyclical Letter*.

⁵¹ John Paul, *Encyclical Letter*.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Christ⁵⁴. John Paul II writes that work is for man, not the other way around. Man is not a means to an end, namely production; rather, work is a means to man's end—heaven and union with the Creator⁵⁵. He continues, “Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man *not only transforms nature*, adapting it to his own needs, but he also *achieves fulfillment* as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more human’”⁵⁶. He recognizes man's need for work, but emphasizes that this must not come at the cost of man's dignity.

John Paul II worked closely with the Polish Labor Union Solidarity against the communist regime and aided them in his papacy through moral support⁵⁷. This act was instrumental in the formation of Solidarity because it established Solidarity as a legitimate group and a force to be reckoned with.

Conclusion:

Throughout his lifetime, Pope John Paul II established himself as a human rights activist by asserting that each human being has dignity and rights, such as the right to freedom and the right to fulfilling work which is not dehumanizing. He fought because he knew the inherent value of the human being and wanted to see the world recognize that value as well. His knowledge and understanding of the Catholic Church, biblical interpretations, and deep love for Jesus Christ influenced his promotion of social welfare through his teaching and activism on the value and dignity of human life, the value of freedom, and the value of work. Using his own experience as a background, he was able to empathize with those who suffered under communist regimes and thus fight communism. His love for Christ radiated through him as he worked

⁵⁴ John Paul, *Encyclical Letter*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ George Weigel, *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II--The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy* (New York, NY: Image Books, 2010), 116-30.

tirelessly to bring understanding to the world through his writings, and actions. It is through his works that millions in 20th century Europe were freed from the bonds of communism.

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