

THE HUMAN PERSON CONCEPTUALIZED BY JOHN PAUL II AS A 'BRIDGE BUILDER' (PONTI-FEX)

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It may be of interest to the participants of the XI Session to note the little known fragment of the late Pope's thought on Christian humanism which – as far as I have been able to ascertain – is only available in the Polish language. I refer to the source of his theological inspiration in the poetry of Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821-1883), the most original and least appreciated Polish poet of the nineteenth century. Norwid's poetry and prose, largely written in an idiosyncratic and difficult style, was rediscovered in the early years of the twentieth century and soon became the standard literary diet of high school students aspiring to a university education. I can testify to this as a contemporary of Karol Wojtyła (although in two different schools) because I shared his fascination with Norwid's profound understanding of history with its underlying respect for the dignity of the individual.

To the best of my knowledge only one of the Pope's many biographers – George Weigel – noted the inspiration of Norwid's writings on the pontiff's teaching: the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (1981) with its stress on the 'redeeming power of work accepted with love [as] the highest manifestation of human freedom' (*Witness to Hope*, p.401).

Much later in his pontificate John Paul had a special occasion to acknowledge his indebtedness to Norwid and again focus on the dignity of the human person. The occasion was the message composed in Polish dated 31 June 2001 and addressed to organizers of the conference 'Cypriana Norwida Projekt Cywilizacyjny' (Cyprian Norwid's Civilizing Plans) which I attended in Krakow in September 2001.

The message begins with the acknowledgement of his 'long and close spiritual association with the poet'. The Pope went on to say:

His thoughts helped us to maintain our set values and live with dignity during the German occupation and then during the long peri-

od full of injustice and contempt with which the communist system treated the human person. Cyprian Norwid had bequeathed us his writings that contain unique insights into the nature and the truth of our existence...

In many of his poems and other forms of narrative framed as parables, Norwid used Greek mythology to focus on moral and spiritual relations between people. In 'Sfinks' it is the myth of Oedipus and his encounter with the Sphinx – a fabulous winged monster, half human, half leonine, who used to put a riddle to all passersby and destroyed those who could not answer. Oedipus solved the riddle: 'man' and the Sphinx killed itself. As a reward, Oedipus received the throne of Thebes.

The myth of Oedipus features as a background of Norwid's narrative. Writing in the first person he gives an account of the poet's encounter with the Sphinx.

'Tell the *truth*, he said, he who would not tolerate a moment's respite. I answered him, '*man? – Who is priest but not yet fully conscious [of it] and immature*'. And wonder of wonders, Sphinx retreated to his cave and I escaped alive.

John Paul quotes this stanza from Norwid and adds his comment:

Man is a priest whose life-long task from the very beginning is to be a builder of bridges (*ponti-fex*) that link person to person and all of us to God. Societies that allow this priestly role to be neglected will not develop their full potential. I can now conclude that this Norwidian idea has always been central in my thinking and *crucial in the development of the social dimension of my pontificate* (paragraph 6, Vatican 31 June 2001).

John Paul's admission that the Norwidian vision of the human person whose inherent dignity makes him capable of promoting human bonds through the building of bridges will be of special interest to students of the late Pope's teaching. But the centrality of this vision enables us also to focus on his philosophy of personalism as well as on his own poetry – both seen as responses to the crisis of civilization. At the same time, however, his writings demonstrate the acute awareness of the sociologist focussed on the significance of the human bond in the quest for social justice.