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Gerald O'Collins

## Pope John Paul II and the Master's Tournament

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When people learn that I lived and taught at Rome's Gregorian University for the entire pontificate of John Paul II (1978–2005), they sometimes ask: 'Ever write a document for him? Ever have a meal with him?' The short answer to both questions is 'yes'. In 1995, I drafted a speech for him when he addressed the cardinals and Vatican ambassadors on the topic of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope). The conversation at lunch with him included not only central questions of Christian theology but also results from the Master's tournament which had just ended in Atlanta, Georgia.

In the early 1990s the Pope invited the rector of the Roman Oriental Institute to put together a team of theologians for a series of seminars to be held privately in the papal apartments inside Vatican City. As a representative of Western Christianity, I came once to share in the exchange.

We met shortly after Easter Sunday 1993, with the Pope sitting at the head of a long table and listening attentively to our presentations. I summarized the classic theory of St Anselm of Canterbury (*d.* 1109), which interpreted human redemption primarily as Christ's making amends for the offence to the divine honour caused by sin. I argued that, despite its great and long-lasting influence in both Catholic and Protestant Christianity, Anselm's theory of satisfaction cannot be taken to be anything like defined doctrine. I then enlarged on ways of understanding redemption as *the* great work of divine love.

The other participants concentrated on writers from Russian and further branches of Eastern Christianity. The Pope said very little

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during the session. At the end, he gathered up our summaries and led us off for lunch in his private dining room.

I found myself sitting on his right. The previous day John Paul II had made a lightning visit to Albania, now relatively free after suffering years of appalling tyranny under Enver Hoxha. Over the meal I fished for the reactions and observations. The Pope's two secretaries were astonished at Hoxha's obsession with national defence; he had filled Albania with concrete fortifications. But I got nowhere with the Pope himself. Albania had provided yesterday's agenda. Today's business was with the seminar participants, and with another group he was to receive later in the afternoon. He wanted to continue the seminar discussion over the meal, and had much to ask and say about the nature of human redemption.

I had long been aware that the Pope, like his predecessors, emphasized the role of St Peter as *leader*. Our lunch together seemed a golden opportunity to encourage John Paul II towards presenting even more about Peter's role as *witness* to Christ's resurrection – something underlined by Luke 24: 34, St Paul (1 Corinthians 15:5), and the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. I asked the Pope to give that Petrine witness to Easter a chance. People had forgotten it and theologians highlighted unilaterally the leadership themes of Matthew 16:18–19, Luke 22:31–32, and John 21:15–17.

It is this New Testament leadership language which catches your eye when you lift your eyes inside St Peter's basilica (e.g. 'feed my lambs; feed my sheep'). You will look in vain for the witness texts of Luke 24:34 ('the Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon [Peter]') or 1 Corinthians 15:5 (Christ 'appeared to Cephas' (= Peter the rock)).

'I promise not to do that again', John Paul II said teasingly, and declared himself ready to show a preference for the texts expressing Peter's role (with Mary Magdalene) of *witness* to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But the three, classical leadership texts were to receive the primary emphasis once again two years later in the papal encyclical on Christian unity *Ut unum sint* ('that they may be one').

Since my lunch with the Pope took place only a few weeks after Easter Sunday, I thought he should know about an unusual act of witness that had taken place in the United States and paralleled the confession of the resurrection that had come in his words 'urbi et orbi' (to the city and the world) uttered in St Peter's square. 'Holy Father, you had competition this year from a champion German golfer, Bernard Langer. On Easter Sunday he, too, announced to millions from Atlanta, Georgia, the wonderful news of Christ's resurrection.

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'Langer? Golf? Atlanta, Georgia?' The Pope knew everything about soccer but nothing at all about golf. I had to offer him a crash course on the nature and rules of that game. I needed also to explain that two years previously Langer had lost the prestigious Ryder Cup for the European team by failing to sink a five-foot putt. That would have tied the competition, and the Europeans would have kept the Cup. This year he had, so to speak, come back from the dead to win the Master's tournament.

As Langer stood on the last green of the Atlanta national course and pulled on the famous green jacket, he used TV channels in witnessing, before a worldwide public, to his faith in the risen Christ. He told them of his immense joy in winning on Easter Sunday, when the tournament ended that year and the glistening white dogwood was at its best in Atlanta. 'This is the greatest day in the year', Langer announced, 'the day when Jesus rose from the dead'.

The conversation with the Pope over lunch in 1993 packed in many theological insights. We also talked, for example, about his May 1986 encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (Lord and Giver of Life), and discussed difficulties which Greek and Russian Orthodox Christians have with the way Catholics speak (or fail to speak) about the Holy Spirit's place in the life of the tripersonal God and in the work of human redemption. I told John Paul II how glad I had been to find the expression 'God's self-communication' turning up repeatedly in the encyclical. 'I didn't take it over from Karl Rahner', the Pope replied, perhaps suspecting that I expected an acknowledgment of the outstanding Jesuit theologian who had written often on the divine 'self-communication'. John Paul II explained: 'I used that personal term about the Holy Spirit hoping to build a bridge to the Orthodox'.

One might add that God's 'self-communication' was an idea and term that goes back to the early centuries of Christianity. In the nineteenth century the term emerged through the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Although discussion of the divine 'self-communication' returned under the auspices of Liberal Protestantism and German Idealism, the term does not carry difficult memories from a thousand-year-old debate about the Holy Spirit that has agitated Orthodox Christians.

In *Man of the Century* Jonathan Kwitny identified the same intention. Sensitive to the Greek, Russian, and other Orthodox complaint that 'Catholics made the Holy Spirit subsidiary in the Trinity', the Pope reached out to them in the hope of healing the rift. Anticipating the 'ugly religious clash' that was to come in what was then the USSR and the 'countless lives lost in what was then Yugoslavia', John Paul II stressed the importance of the Holy

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Spirit, and expressed the hope for an ecumenical unity ‘to restore religion’s force in life’. What I heard directly from the Pope in 1993 supports Kwitny’s assessment.

All in all, that spring lunch with John Paul II proved a feast for the theological mind. Never dull, the Pope took in his stride a lesson in golf and some news from Atlanta, Georgia. Every year the Master’s tournament recalls for me a celebration of Berhard Langer’s victory and faith that reached as far as the papal apartments and the balcony of St Peter’s Basilica.

**Ordinary Time.** During Ordinary Time we hear the stories of Jesus’ life and ministry through his teaching and parables, through his meals and healings, through his conversations with followers and challengers, right up to his final journey towards and into Jerusalem. In following them we get a real sense of journeying with Jesus and of his vision of the kingdom of heaven as a way of life in the here and now. There is much richness to be discovered when we allow the story to unfold from one Sunday to the next. We are invited to be active participants in the gospel story, using it as a time to draw closer to Jesus and to grow and mature in our understanding and faith. Don’t let this anything-but-ordinary time pass you by.

– THE IRISH JESUITS, *Sacred Space: ‘The Companion’*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2024, p. 57.