

May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011

## JOHN PAUL II

*"He talked about freedom. And changed me."*

### The encounter

A journalist remembers the discussion she had in 1975 with the Polish cardinal who was almost unknown at that time, an experience that has touched her deeply. "I said: we need a Pope like you ..."



*by Maria Cristina Giongo*

In life there are unforgettable encounters that leave a profound impression. At the moment they occur they cause an almost imperceptible change: an inner movement of renewal, almost a conversion. This also happened to me, at the Ambrosianum at Milan, when I met the Archbishop of Krakow who later became Pope John Paul II. It was a contact with unforeseen and extraordinary aspects. But let us start at the beginning ...

At the time I worked on the editorial board of the Christian Democratic newspaper *Il Popolo Lombardo* [The Lombardian People]. My director, Vincenzo Dittrich, asked me to attend a conference on human rights related to the recent Synod of Bishops, where Cardinal Colombo and other prelates of various nationalities were present. I would have an interview with a certain ... Cardinal Wojtyla. It was the 4<sup>th</sup> of December 1975. The beautiful sixteenth-century hall was crowded with people; the mediator was the president of the Ambrosianum, Giovanni Ancarani. When Cardinal Wojtyla began to speak about the documents of the Second Vatican Council, I was immediately struck by his charisma and also by the richness of his message concerning the Council, which concentrated on defending human rights. I remember that the more he talked about this

subject, the more he got excited. "Human beings should be free from coercion of any kind and be free to express themselves and practice their own beliefs", he said. "Two important concepts: a negative, freedom from, and a positive, freedom to. The task of the civil power is to promote religious freedom, to defend it, but without interfering in its choices; on the other hand within the human rights there is also the right to unite. If this exists at the political level, it should also exist in the religious field. I remember thinking: "How true! This man is fantastic!" And I too started to get carried away, with the enthusiasm of my 24 years. I wonder how Pope Wojtyla would have reacted now to the despotic demands to remove crucifixes from schools and public places. I think he would be furious! Especially he, coming from a country where certain rights were violated. On this matter he was very determined. "In Poland we now had succeeded to maintain the freedom and a certain unity. But it has cost us a lot, still does and will continue to cost us. On the other hand the church has the right to defend itself. In fact, the church by itself has its own transcendent nature of the people and it is this transcendent sigh that absolutely must be preserved." I still remember the words with which he ended his speech: "We must eliminate all forms of discrimination. There must be freedom to erect buildings, to maintain or to remove its own priests, to manage. To verbally and in writing teach and testify one's own doctrine. Words that today, after 36 years, are still relevant, essential and necessary to awake sleeping consciences. After the conference I asked him permission to have an interview.

We sat together. Karol Wojtyla was an impressive man; a beautiful man. His strength and inner beauty were reflected in his appearance. Especially his eyes, which met mine in a soft, paternal manner, hit me.

We talked about a number of things and did so for a long time: abortion, terrorism, terrorists and "those who silently assist their violence". And after that about Marxism. By the way, about Marxism: he did not rule out the possibility of an encounter between Christians and Marxist, but "solely to protect the rights of the citizens". Yet again he repeated the words right and freedom that were so important to him. I asked him to whom exactly he addressed his message. In his reply he stressed that it was not just about his message or his thoughts, but about the Council itself, aimed at "all those who wield and spread power. And ... to those who destroy her!" Meanwhile, the janitor had started to extinguish the lights. I would have liked to talk to him longer, surprised and honored by the interest he displayed listening to my ideas (and ideals) that were still under development and about which I still had my doubts.

The encounter with this extraordinary man, who became Pope three years later and now is beatified, had already left an indelible impression. Before leaving I enthusiastically cried that ... we would have needed a Pope just like him, with his principles of freedom and modernity there would surely have been a need for this. A veil of melancholy covered his eyes. He remained silent for a moment. He then said that the Pope should take the whole collectivity into account, not just his own ideas. For the simple reason that there are rules that should be applied to the entire

community: you cannot customize them for each individual. Freedom from ... freedom to. During the farewell I pressed a kiss on his cheek, on which he burst into a laugh.

When he was elected Pope, not everyone in Italy knew who he was. I did. I immediately wrote an article about the past Conference (published on October 17, 1978 by the *Corriere della Sera*). But I did not mention our private conversation. I wanted to keep that to myself, like a precious jewel you keep in a vault for fear that it will be stolen. It was my emotion which I wanted to keep that to myself. Until now. Now I have decided to share it with others, like Pope John Paul II had told me: sharing is also a God-willed integral and important part of our earthly existence.

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CL, more than 40 pilgrims in Rome

Sunday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, there will be more than 40 thousand members of the *Comunione e Liberazione* [Communion and Liberation, a Catholic youth movement] attending the beatification of John Paul II. For the occasion, the traditional spiritual practices of the Fraternity of CL, which were planned from April 29 to May 1, will end early on the evening of April 30, in order that the 25,000 participants and secondary school pupils, students and other adults that are not present in Rimini, can join the pilgrimage to Rome during the evening. So also the members of CL unite "for the Pope and Church", said Don Julian Carron, "in thanksgiving to God who has given us a genuine testimony of Christ. We want to join Benedict XVI, who in his foresight has decided to show the world the Blessed John Paul II as an example of what Christ can do with a man who devotes himself to Him."