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A Civilization of Love according to John Paul II

Abstract

During his pontificate, Pope John Paul II strongly supported the idea of “civilization of love”. To the Polish Pope, the existence of ‘the civilization of love’ was the foundation of a humane world in the context of a civilization depreciating the value of the human being. This article addresses the concept of “the civilization of love”, with a special focus drawn to the aims, principles and fundamental assumptions of “the civilization of love.”

Keywords

Pope John Paul II, “civilization of love”, life, solidarity, peace.

The term “civilization of love” has a history, which is even longer than the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. It was originally proposed by Pope Paul VI and has its roots in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Nonetheless, the development, popularization, and propagation of the idea were fully pursued by Pope John II¹ who, within the framework of social formation, promoted the

¹ Cf. J. Czajkowski, *Człowiek w nauce Jana Pawła II*, Rzym 1983, pp. 87-88.

civilization of truth and love.² To John Paul II, the existence of ‘the civilization of love’ was the foundation of a humane world, which is why he encouraged everyone to inspire their lives with love, and engaged in the work towards assuring its victory. The call of the Polish Pope stemmed from the conviction that in the context of a civilization depreciating the value of the human being, who is the image of God, only love can guarantee the protection of our personal dignity.³ Hence, the article addresses the concept of the civilization of love, which permeated the life and teachings of Pope John Paul II, with a special focus drawn to the aims, principles and fundamental assumptions of “the civilization of love.”

1. The main aim and the principles of the civilization of love

The main aim of the pontifical program of the development of the civilization of love comes down to infusing the life and human activity with the spirit of the Gospel in every field of human existence – social, cultural, economic, and political – by means of the employment of social justice and love, resignation from violence and exploitation, and the respect of the dignity of each individual. The hope seen in the civilization of love, which our Pontiff aimed to arouse in the whole world, has its roots in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of life and love.⁴ Those, who live for Jesus Christ are able to break the power of the Evil so as to help the world experience transformation in line with God’s intentions and reach utter perfection. A Christian should be characterized by the profound conviction that the reason why God enters in a relationship with mankind, anticipating their response is love.⁵ According to John Paul II, it is God, being accurately defined as “love,” who constituted the proof for the victory of the civilization of love. God is the only reason why there is no doubt that the civilization of love will win, despite the most dramatic instances of the culture of death. The full and unconditional affirmation of a human being is thus impossible and

² Cf. *Reconciliatio et Penitentia* 12; Jan Paweł II, *Ewangelia życia*, in: *Anioł Pański z papieżem Janem Pawłem II*, vol.6, eds. S. Dziwisz, H. Nowacki, P. Ptasznik, Vatican 1998, p. 71.

³ Cf. *Gratissimam sane* 13; Jan Paweł II, *Zawsze aktualne zadanie: wychować do pokoju*, Orędzie Światowy Dzień Pokoju 2004, „L’Osservatore Romano” 25 (2004), p. 7; A. Kiciński, *Formacja społeczna młodych Polaków w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II*, in: *Katecheza w ujęciu Jana Pawła II*, ed. J. Zimny, Sandomierz 2004, pp. 130-131.

⁴ Cf. *Evangelium Vitae* 26-27; *Evangelium Vitae* 100.

⁵ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Orędzie na Boże Narodzenie* 1993, 3, 4.

incomprehensible without its ontological, moral and psychological relation with the Personal God. For that very reason, the creation of the world ruled by the law of love seemed to the Pope only possible when the world acknowledges the universal authority of God the Father. In this context, the commitment to the creation of the civilization of love ceases to be solely a human action and becomes the mission entrusted to human beings by Jesus Christ.⁶

By propagating the vision of the civilization of love, John Paul II did not aim neither to interfere with secular teachings nor to substitute them with sacred ones but he proposed a theological solution. The civilization of love devolves from Christology and the paschal mystery in particular since the world, being born from love, seeks eschatological love. In its essence, the world is governed by the logic of the ongoing transformation of love into mercy and mercy into love. It happens despite the multiple sources of evil that can be found in the social life because, in its depth, the human community is able to create the civilization of love. John Paul II emphasized that it is not the contestation of the contemporary reality but rather the universal effort to build the culture based on love and life that is necessary to allow the culture of life and love to emerge. The universal character of the civilization of love and life made it possible for the Pope to address his call not only to Christians, encouraging them to engage in aforementioned efforts, but also to people of other religions as well as nonbelievers. John Paul II highlighted that the realization of the path of love understood universally cannot be, by any means, an option to reject but should be understood as *sine qua non* the future of humanity.⁷ Only love, as the deepest source of the spiritual development of an individual, can bring understanding in interpersonal relations and respect of other people's views and preferences.⁸

The specific agenda of John Paul II's vision of the civilization of love as the new humanism based on Jesus Christ and his Gospel demarcates the ideas of a quadruple priority: a person comes before an object; the spirit before

⁶ Cf. *Evangelium Vitae* 2; Jan Paweł II, *W służbie cywilizacji miłości*, 23.08.2000 – Katecheza podczas audiencji generalnej; Jan Paweł II, *Trzeba budować „Cywilizację miłości”*, Audiencja Generalna, 15.12.1999.

⁷ Cf. *Evangelium Vitae* 96; *Redemptor Hominis* 1; Jan Paweł II, *Przemówienie do młodzieży*, Częstochowa, 18 VI 1983, „Znak” (1983) No. 11-12, p. 1733; K. Majdański, *Cywilizacja życia*, „Ethos” 2 (1989), pp. 25-37.

⁸ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Przemówienie wygłoszone podczas spotkania ekumenicznego*, Warszawa, 17 VI 1983, „Znak” (1983) No. 11-12, pp. 1692-1693.

matter; ethics before technology, and mercy before justice.⁹ The civilization of love follows the priority of a person before an object based on the assumption that it is better “to be” rather than “to own.” John Paul II claimed that the real personalization of the world cannot be pursued without acknowledging the truth that humankind is the main value and human’s presence is incomparable to the world of objects. The priority of the spirit before the matter, also known as “the new humanism,” leads to the development of the whole humankind in internal truth, freedom, and dignity.¹⁰ Hence, while paying attention to human development, we need to make sure that a person becomes more and more human and that he or she lives not only with other people but, predominantly, for other people.¹¹ Finally, a person should develop as a spiritual and physical entity.

By means of the solid appreciation of the spiritual sphere of human existence, John Paul II aimed to confront the consumerist and materialistic society. However, he emphasized that the dividing line does not go between capitalism and socialism, or the wealthy and the poor, but between cultures valuing material goods over the spiritual values.¹²

Again, the main goal of the priority of ethics over technology is ensuring the humanization of both people and the world which is necessary to overcome the threats of the technological civilization model. Only in this way can we maintain the right balance between the development of technology and morality, induce the subjectification of man in the world of economy and technology, as well as stop the rapacious economy against natural resources. Creating a civilization in which the ethics are given priority over technology was seen by the Pope as an opportunity to rebuild the natural connection between the human and nature, lost in the contemporary world. The priority of ethics over technology becomes

⁹ Cf. *Redemptor Hominis* 16; *Dives et Misericordia* 4; *Dives et Misericordia* 8-11; *Dives et Misericordia* 14; *Laborem Exercens* 20; *Evangelium Vitae* 98.

¹⁰ Cf. *Familiaris Consortio* 8; Jan Paweł II, *Na forum pokoju i sprawiedliwości*. Orędzie do Organizacji Narodów Zjednoczonych w Nowym Jorku, 2 X 1979 in: Jan Paweł II, *Nauczanie społeczne 1978-79*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1982, p. 310.

¹¹ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Przemówienie w siedzibie Organizacji Narodów Zjednoczonych do spraw Oświaty, Nauki i Kultury (UNESCO)* (Fragments, No. 11-14), Paryż, 2 June 1980, in: *Wychowanie w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II (1978-1999)*, ed. S. Urbański, Warszawa 2000, p. 130.

¹² Cf. M. Skrzypek, *Filozofia i teologia pokoju Jana Pawła II*, „*Studia Filozoficzne*” 17 (1983), p. 129.

the necessary condition allowing to situate the person before an object, preserve the natural environment as well as restore the ecological balance.¹³

The next necessary building block in the creation of the civilization of love pertains to the priority of mercy over justice. According to the Polish Pope, this priority is so fundamental because the experience of the past and contemporary times shows that justice is not sufficient to build a satisfied society. This does not by any means suggest that justice ought to be depreciated but rather implies that we should dig deeper into the spiritual strengths which ultimately condition justice. There is no true justice without love towards one another. Charitable love cannot have the character of pity or sentimentalism but should rather be based on the common experience of the good in the form of a human being.¹⁴ Without the active presence of love, justice can become inhumane, ruthless, and cold. Mercy, as a deeper form of justice, begins where traditional justice ends.¹⁵ The participation in the building of a civilization of love should be one of the tasks for everyone who cares about the human wellbeing.¹⁶ Christian education targeted towards the civilization of love ought to develop their members to accept and realize the concept of the quadruple priority: the priority of a person over an object, then ethics over technology, the spirit over the matter, and, finally, mercy over justice.

¹³ Cf. *Dives in Misericordia* 11; *Redemptoris Mater* 16; *Laborem Exercens* 7; *Laborem Exercens* 13.

¹⁴ Cf. Luke 15:11-32.

¹⁵ Cf. *Dives in Misericordia* 6; *Dives in Misericordia* 12-15; K. Wojtyła, *Personalizm tomistyczny*, „Znak” (1961) No. 5, p. 671; K. Kołodziejczyk, *Etyka społeczna Karola Wojtyły*, Toruń 2000, pp. 30-33; S. Grygiel, *Miłość*, in: *Katolicyzm A-Z*, Poznań 1989, pp. 266-267; J. Höffner, *Chrześcijańska nauka społeczna*, (trans.) S. Pyszka, Lublin 1998, p. 61; S. Kowalczyk, *Filozofie odrzucające miłość i miłosierdzie*, in: Jan Paweł II, *Dives in misericordia. Tekst i komentarze*, ed. S. Nagy, Lublin 1983, p. 270.

¹⁶ Cf. *Religious Education / Catechesis in the Family. A European Perspective*, eds. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Warszawa 2010; *Education and Creativity*, ed. E. Osewska, Warszawa 2014; *The Contemporary Family: Local and European Perspectives*, eds. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Kraków 2015; *Focus on Family and Education*, ed. E. Osewska, Split 2016; *Strong Families – Strong Societies*, ed. E. Osewska, Kraków 2019; H. Lombaerts, E. Osewska, *Family and Family Catechesis. A Matter of Diversification*, „Acta Paedagogica Vilenensia” (2008), vol. 20, pp. 225-243.

2. The respect towards life, solidarity and peace as an answer to the society in crisis

In creating the civilization of love, the Pope John Paul II noticed that society is in crisis, finding its manifestation in the lack of respect towards human life, which is why he unceasingly reminded us that the human life is sacred as only God is its Master. Thus, the affirmation of human life, beginning from the conception until the natural death, is the test that checks the attitude of one individual towards the other, and examines the authentic morality, both Christian and humane.¹⁷ That is why the Pontiff continuously pointed out that life, viewed as a gift from God, must be accepted and protected, especially when it is frail or sick.¹⁸ Taking care of the weakest and giving our help to them is the testimony of the civilization of love¹⁹ since it evokes the stance of Jesus Christ, who took care of and healed the sick.

One particular type of interpersonal relations related to love, and thus being crucial in the creation of the civilization of love, is solidarity. For John Paul II, solidarity was associated with the ongoing readiness to accept and realize such portion of the goods as it was rationed to an every member of the community.²⁰ Along with solidarity based on the natural dimension, the Pope mentions Christian solidarity having its source in the stance of Jesus Christ.²¹ The Pontiff implied that showing solidarity has to take the form of service towards the others and the respect to their dignity.²² Emphasized by John Paul II the stance of solidarity

¹⁷ Cf. *Evangelium Vitae* 8.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ecclesia in Europa* 95; *Christifideles Laici* 38; *Evangelium Vitae* 6; Jan Paweł II, *Szacunek dla życia najsłabszych*, 3 XI 2003, *Do przedstawicieli Chrześcijańskiego Ośrodka dla Osób Niepełnosprawnych z Paryża*, 3.

¹⁹ Cf. *Człowiek chory i umierający. Możliwości wsparcia i formy pomocy*, red. J. Stala, Kraków 2014; *Człowiek wobec bólu, cierpienia i śmierci*, red. J. Stala, N. Bravena, Kraków 2013; *Życie i śmierć. Wyzwania działalności charytatywnej*, red. J. Stala, Tarnów 2012; *Katecheza specjalna dzisiaj. Problemy i wyzwania*, red. J. Stala, Kielce 2003; S. Dziekoński, *Dziecko niepełnosprawne w rodzinie i szkole w nauce Jana Pawła II*, in: *Ochrona życia i zdrowia człowieka w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II*, ed. J. W. Czartoszewski, Warszawa 2006, pp. 176-177.

²⁰ Cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 38; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 40; K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn*, Kraków 2000, p. 351.

²¹ Cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 48; T. Klein, *Jana Pawła II odczytanie biblijnego przesłania o Bożym miłosierdziu*, Pelplin 2008, pp. 173-174.

²² Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Strzeżcie tych wartości i tego dziedzictwa, które stanowi o waszej tożsamości*, „Pomerania. Miesięcznik społeczno-kulturalny” 8 (1987), p. 13; K. Wojtyła,

does not reject the possibility of an objection, which is a natural attitude being a manifestation of participation. Dialogue is constituted through tensions and conflicts and its aim is to extract anything which can be a source of good for the people.²³ At this point, the mutuality does not matter as much as one's good deeds addressed towards anyone who is in need. Through building the community of love and crossing some of its boundaries at the same time, the civilization of love treats every individual as a neighbor.²⁴ Seeing solidarity as a true marker of the civilization of love, John Paul II seems not to have any doubt that it would become the broadly understood principle of one's social life when it went global.²⁵ Solidarity does not have anything in common with any kind of group, class, or national egoism. This also means the exclusion of imperialism of any type, the pursuit of hegemony or any form of exploitation or hate which can be found in almost any civilization that has already been built. Jesus Christ demanded a mentality shift, a re-evaluation of the criteria used in assessing a human being, and the respect of everyone's dignity. He called for practicing the active love of thy neighbor in the image of the perfection of God. God's order to love one's neighbor required even more: namely sharing with people in need, also whenever it signifies resigning from some of one's socio-economic liberties.²⁶

The civilization of love described by John Paul II is closely related to maintaining peace in the world. Occasional inter-religious meetings of various kinds organized by him were always combined with congregational prayer. Peace is the common good of all nations and it is a path of solidarity, dialogue, and universal comradeship.²⁷ By calling for building peace in the world, the Pope emphasized that all means should be taken in order to remove the obstacles preventing the realization of peace. Peace is the common vocation of every individual and every nation.²⁸ Scientific and technological progress, which should contribute

Wspólnota ludzka w oczach Soboru, „Zeszyty Naukowe KUL” 22 (1979) No. 1-3, p. 10.

²³ Cf. K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn*, pp. 352-353.

²⁴ Cf. *Dominum et Vivificantem* 10.

²⁵ Cf. *Redemptor Hominis* 16.

²⁶ Cf. *Centesimus Annus* 42; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 39; J. Majka, *Węzłowe problemy katolickiej nauki społecznej*, Rome-Warszawa 1990, pp. 28-29.

²⁷ Cf. *Evangelium Vitae* 101; Jan Paweł II, *Ewangelia życia*, in: *Anioł Pański z papieżem Janem Pawłem II*, vol. 6, eds. S. Dziwisz, H. Nowacki, P. Ptasznik, Vatican 1998, p. 72.

²⁸ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Pokój jest naszym posłannictwem*, in: *Anioł Pański z papieżem Janem Pawłem II*, vol. 6, eds. S. Dziwisz, H. Nowacki, P. Ptasznik, Vatican 1998, p. 103.

to the wellbeing of humans, is often transformed into the tools of war. Science and technology are used to produce new and better weapons. At the same time, ideologies providing justification for war are being created.

Taking into consideration this alarming state of affairs, John Paul II continuously asserted that the way of building the civilization of love is to maintain the dialogue between various cultures and religions.

A significant role here is played by the Christian allegiance to the new commandment to love thy neighbor, which can still amaze the world and which understands comradeship not as a utopia but a reality possible to be achieved.²⁹ Under such circumstances it seems important to acquire the skills of solving interpersonal and international conflicts by means of dialogue, mediation, and negotiation. A Christian who is building the civilization of love ought to be aware of the fact that peace is its compelling element and the care for the peaceful problem solving in the sphere of social and national life is one of the manifestations of one's personal and religious maturity.

The call to create the civilization of love propagated by John Paul II is related to the Gospel of life and truth, personalism, providing others with our selfless acts of good, as well as teaching the regard to human life, promoting values such as love, solidarity, peace, and dialog and also the prudent approach to material goods. The Pope was aware that the threats associated with the contemporary world, such as over-technologization, individualism, and social egoism, demand not only the propagation of the civilization of love but also the gradual process of teaching, educating, and implementing this idea into the lives of the young generation. This might be the reason why his whole pontificate, manifested either in documents or in oral preaching, called for the formation of a human being who would pursue the love of God and the neighbor, along with his or her conscientious and responsible life in the society and within the nation. In line with the

²⁹ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Orędzie na światowy dzień młodzieży 1997*, 8; Jan Paweł II, *Orędzie na Wielkanoc 2004*, 2; Jan Paweł II, *Orędzie na Wielkanoc 2001*, 5; J. Stala, *Formation of Adult Lay Catholics for Commitment in the World*, „The Person and the Challenges“ 7 (2017) no. 2, pp. 93-106; J. Stala, *Die Erziehungsmission der Familie: Aktuelle Herausforderungen und neue Konzeptionen*, „The Person and the Challenges“ 7 (2017) no. 1, pp. 133–147; J. Stala, *Valores como fatores determinantes. Implicações pedagógico-catequéticas para o ensino religioso*, „Theologica“ (2016), fasc. 1, pp. 151-159.

term “a civilization of love” propagated by the Pope John Paul II, all humankind is called to the realization of truth and love in their everyday lives, and for the full engagement in the work of building a truly humane world.

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