

Franciscan University Presents
“John Paul II: A Teaching Pope”
With guest, Dr. Alan Schreck

Excerpt taken from
*The Legacy of Pope John Paul II:
The Central Teaching of His 14 Encyclical Letters*
by Dr. Alan Schreck

In the two-thousand-year history of the papacy, proclaiming and teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ has always been central to the popes’ mission and ministry. As St. Peter concluded the Church’s first sermon on the day of Pentecost; “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36).

This proclamation echoes through centuries at the heart of Christian and papal teaching. Popes are also the Church’s chief shepherds; and while the responsibilities of governing the Church and addressing challenges from the world preoccupied many popes, others recognized their primary responsibility to proclaim and teach the Gospel. In recent times, I observe almost a new kind of papacy that emphasizes leading the Church through teaching, exemplified by popes such as Leo XIII (pope 1878-1903). I would go so far as to characterize the popes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and now into the twenty-first century) as “teaching popes.” While they certainly carry out their priestly and pastoral duties faithfully, they lead the Church mainly by their example and teaching. Since the Second Vatican Council, the “style” of that teaching has changed somewhat, moving away from a *Magisterium* concerned primarily with warnings and condemnations of false teachings to a teaching style that seeks to instruct positively about the Catholic faith and the positive implications and applications of the Gospel in today’s world. Pope John XXIII recommended and followed this approach, as he expressed it in his opening speech to the bishops at the Second Vatican Council, a council that he initiated. He declared:

The Catholic Church, raising the torch of religious truth by means of this Ecumenical Council, desires to show herself to be the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness toward the brethren who are separated from her. To mankind, oppressed by so

many difficulties, the Church says, as Peter said to the poor who begged alms from him: “I have neither gold nor silver, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise and walk” (Acts 3:6). In other words, the Church does not offer to the men of today riches that pass, nor does she promise them a merely earthly happiness. But she distributes to them the goods of divine grace which, raising men to the dignity of sons of God, are the most efficacious safeguards and aid toward a more human life. She opens the fountain of her life-giving doctrine which allows men, enlightened by the light of Christ, to understand well what they really are, what their lofty dignity and their purpose are, and finally through her children, she spreads everywhere the fullness of Christian charity, than which nothing is more effective in eradicating the seeds of discord, nothing more efficacious in promoting concord, just peace, and the brotherly unity of all. (October 11, 1962, no. 7)

I believe that what Pope John XXIII stated about the teaching of the Second Vatican Council also characterizes the teaching of Pope John Paul II. This should not surprise us, as young Bishop Karol Wojtyla was decisively formed and shaped by his experience at the Council, as he himself stated in his book, *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of Vatican II*, first published in Polish in 1972, then in English in 1979.

IMPORTANCE OF ENCYCLICAL LETTERS

John Paul II was a “teaching pope”—a pope who led the Church and influenced the world primarily by the example of his life (his holiness) and by his teaching. In modern times, the encyclical letter has been the instrument for popes to express their most important teaching. While an encyclical letter may be presented to commemorate a particular event or feast day, its importance and application transcends that event or occasion. This teaching has lasting importance and value for the Church, and often for the whole world.

This is the importance of becoming familiar with the encyclical letters of Pope John Paul II. His encyclicals are what he believed to be most important for him to teach as pope to the Church and to the world. Therefore, it is no coincidence that his first encyclical letter is a proclamation of Jesus Christ, as was St. Peter’s first message on the day of Pentecost. Then within his first five encyclical letter he completes his

Trinitarian teaching with letters on the mercy of the Father (*Dives in Misericordia*) and on the Holy Spirit (*Dominum et Vivificantem*). As one of the bishops who worked to compose Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*), it was fitting as pope that he should continue to teach about important social issues, such as on human work (*Laborem Exercens*) and on the sanctity and protection of human life (*Evangelium Vitae*). It may seem odd to some that he should write an encyclical letter on the two saints Cyril and Methodius (*Slavorum Apostoli*), but not so odd once they recall that this was a Slavic pope who saw these two Slavic saints as bridges between Eastern and Western Christianity, not to mention between Eastern and Western Europe. Christian unity, a great concern of John Paul II's pontificate, is also the theme of his twelfth encyclical letter, *Ut Unum Sint*.

Knowing how devoted Pope John Paul II was to Mary, Mother of God, so much so as to make his papal motto Mary's own *Totus Tuus* (meaning "totally yours"), it is easy to understand that his writing of an encyclical on Mary (*Redemptoris Mater*), was simply a natural outpouring of his filial love for his Mother and Mother of the Church. He also set to pen and paper his passion for the evangelizing mission of the Church in the hope that all could be revitalized in faith and renew the Church. However, recognizing the damage of nihilistic philosophies and of relativistic cultural trends upon society, this profound Catholic philosopher set out to reaffirm "the splendor of the truth" and "the unity of faith and reason" in two separate encyclicals. Finally, his last and crowning encyclical letter (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*) delves into the unsurpassable gift and mystery of the Eucharist, reflecting on the very heart of the mystery of Christ and of his Church.

Pope John Paul II left the Church with a legacy that will not be forgotten. It is a privilege to introduce you to this legacy by presenting some of the central themes and insights of John Paul II in his fourteen encyclical letters.

Titles Mentioned on *Franciscan University Presents*
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* *The Legacy of Pope John Paul II: The Central Teaching of His 14 Encyclical Letters* by Dr. Alan Schreck. Emmaus Road Publishing.

* *Still Point: Loss, Longing, and Our Search for God* by Dr. Regis Martin. Ave Maria Press.

* *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300-1700* by Dr. Scott Hahn. Crossroad Publishing Company.

* Available through the Franciscan University Bookstore, 1235 University Blvd., Steubenville, OH 43952, 1-888-333-0381, www.franciscan.edu/bookstore.

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