

John Paul II's Letter to the Dean of the Department of Philosophy

translated by Sydney Sadowski¹

edited by Grzegorz Hołub²

Dear Reverend Dean,³

I have carefully read the text of your paper entitled: “Per un progetto di filosofia aperta alla fede.” This report was presented during the meeting of the Commission, which works on the renewal of philosophy in Church teaching. I am pleased that Fr. G. Cottier is participating in this work, and on the margin of his statement I would like to present own thoughts in this area.

My contact with Christian philosophy, and indirectly with philosophy in general, dates back to the time when, during the German occupation, I joined the secret Theological Seminary in Krakow, while also being a worker in the Solvay factory. I independently completed the entire philosophy course required at the Seminary and at the same time at the Faculty of Theology of the Jagiellonian University. I never attended philosophy lectures. So, in a sense I am self-taught in this area. However, from the very beginning I understood that philosophy was very important for my faith, especially from the perspective of the priesthood and pastoral activity.

From my own experience, I know the philosophical study program as it was in force at that time. Metaphysics played a primary role. Other philosophical subjects went hand in hand with it, namely: logic, epistemology, psychology, cosmology, and history of philosophy. Sociology was taught in the context of Catholic social teaching and ethics was taught together with the principles of moral theology.

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³ The letter is probably addressed to Rev. Prof. Józef Życiński, who was Dean of the Department of Philosophy at the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Krakow (1988-1991). It seems that this letter was written after 1989. (Ed. note.)

Krakow had some very outstanding professors during this period, for example: Rev. Prof. Konstanty Michalski, a great expert in medieval philosophy and Rev. Prof. Jan Salamucha, from the Polish school of logic. In my time, a particularly outstanding figure at the Faculty of Philosophy was Rev. Prof. Kazimierz Kłósak, educated in Lovanium, a man of inexhaustible work, whose merits in defending the Catholic worldview in the clash with Marxism cannot be overestimated. When it comes to Catholic social teaching, a very outstanding figure was Rev. Jan Piwowarczyk, one of the founders of “Tygodnik Powszechny,” which was established in Krakow the day after the end of the German occupation.

Before entering the Theological Seminary, I was a student of Polish philology at the Jagiellonian University, with an emphasis on literature. This one year of study allowed me to understand the importance of the language and also prepared me for understanding what contemporary linguistic philosophy is, both in the Anglo-Saxon and Baltic varieties.

The event that determined my philosophical vocation was the textbook that Rev. Prof. Kazimierz Kłósak gave me at the beginning of my seminary studies. I had to learn this metaphysics on my own, but this study was something of a revelation and a breakthrough.⁴ I then realized that philosophy is an indispensable tool for a thorough interpretation of reality and as such it is indispensable in the study of a theologian. Not without significance was my further academic “curriculum”: First, a doctoral dissertation on faith in St. John of the Cross, which, in a way, prepared me to understand the meaning of the subject of thinking, believing, and experiencing the mystery of God. In turn, a postdoctoral thesis on Max Scheler - namely, to the extent that his system can be used to build Christian ethics. Scheler introduced me to the world of post-Cartesian philosophy, in a sense, to Husserl’s school, but he himself crossed the threshold that Husserl failed to cross, even though he set himself such tasks: “zurück zur Gegenstand.” Scheler crossed this threshold with his philosophy of value, which, although it attributes great importance to the subject experiencing value, accepts the extra-subjective existence of value itself. For this reason, the conclusion of my habilitation thesis was that Scheler’s system is not sufficient to build a Christian ethic, but can, incidentally, be very useful for it. As a result, my habilitation in moral theology took me to the Faculty of Philosophy of the Catholic University of Lublin rather than to the Faculty

⁴ Wojtyła means the following book: K. Wais, *Ontologia czyli metafizyka ogólna*, Towarzystwo “Biblioteka Religijna,” Lwów 1926 [Ontology, namely General Metaphysics]. (Ed. note.)

of Theology. I was lecturing there at the Department of Ethics, but actually I was focusing more and more on anthropology, so I went in that direction, which was also the focus of your statement during the meeting of the Commission.

It should be added that anthropology was not a separate subject in the seminary. Its particular elements were included in the principles of moral theology, and from another perspective - in psychology and sociology. Already before the war, and more so after it ended, there was a very lively discussion in Poland between ethicists and psychologists, or sociologists of morality. The positivist school had outstanding representatives in the persons of professors such as Józef Kotarbiński, Tadeusz Czeżowski and Maria Ossowska. At the time of my lectures at the Catholic University of Lublin, this discussion with ethical positivism was something more important than the discussion with Marxism. My successor in the department of ethics, Rev. Prof. Tadeusz Styczeń was very thoroughly prepared in this field, as well as in the field of Anglo-Saxon positivism, associated with the Viennese School and such names as Stevenson, Ayer, and even the young Wittgenstein. Marxists did not hide the fact that they had no ethics of their own, which is why they were more willing to use positivism. At the same time, Marxists themselves paid more and more attention to anthropology.

I am writing about this in order to explain my own path at the Faculty of Lublin, which is marked by the work *Love and Responsibility*, and in turn *Person and Act*, as well as a number of other publications on personalistic issues, partly printed also in *Analecta Husserliana* by Prof. Anna T. Tymieniecka.

To conclude this autobiographical introduction, I would like to add that in pre-war Poland, in addition to the already mentioned Krakow Faculty, the Lvov-Warsaw school of logic developed, widely known in the world with such names as Łukasiewicz, Tarski, Ajdukiewicz, who later lectured at Western universities. In this field, Polish philosophy had a somewhat leading role. The methodology of sciences also originated from there, including the methodology of metaphysics, which was developed at the Catholic University of Lublin primarily by Rev. Prof. Stanisław Kamiński. Marxists respected logic and methodology and tried to use it for their own purposes. Instead, they fought against phenomenology, which had its main representative in Prof. Roman Ingarden, and found a very good reception in university circles, especially at the Catholic University of Lublin. Even more than phenomenologists, Marxists fought Thomism and Catholic philosophy, but they did not dare to liquidate the University of Lublin, and their methods of

struggle strengthened the school of Lublin Thomists, among whom the leading figure is still Rev. Prof. Albert Krapiec OP. In addition to him, mention should be made of Prof. Stefan Swieżawski, who transplanted his version of Thomism to Poland and was able to educate many students in the same spirit.

Thus, unlike in other countries, Marxism in Poland encountered considerable opposition and essentially failed to overcome it, despite the methods of administrative struggle used. Yes, it had to adapt to it to some extent, which soon led to the creation of a revisionist trend, the most outstanding representative of which is the Oxford professor Leszek Kołakowski.

The reason I am writing about this is so that my thoughts, which I would like to attach to this letter, will find some clarification in this academic biography. I also think that it would be useful for the whole matter to study how the situation of philosophy was formed in neighboring countries subjected to the domination of Marxist ideology. Some information can be provided by students from these countries studying at the Catholic University of Lublin and Western universities today, but, in actuality, they already belong to the post-Marxist era. Among the countries mentioned, Russia itself is the most important. You were at the philosophical congress in Moscow, so you realize that there was a process of moving away from Marxist ideology, but knowing the direction in which philosophical circles in this huge country are going is not without significance for the whole picture, especially since today both Orthodox and Catholic higher theological schools are being established there. So, the problem of the meeting between faith and philosophy will be very pertinent again in this area. Of course, one cannot omit such figures as Soloviev and Berdyaev, thinkers emblematic of the entire Byzantine and Russian traditions, which, although in touch with Western thought, at the same time walked their own paths.

With heartfelt blessing,

John Paul II