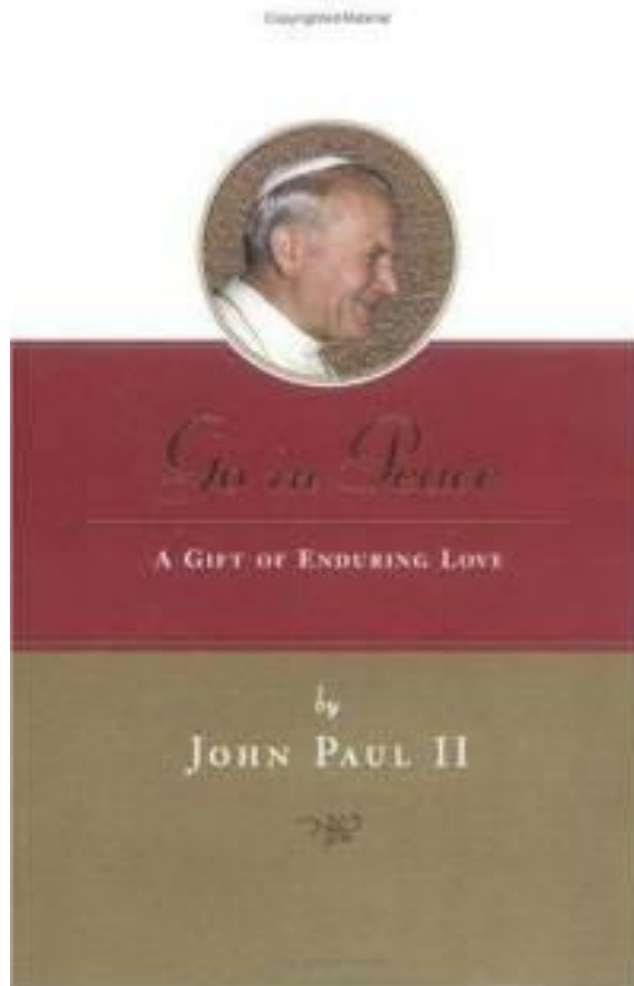


A Summary of *Go in Peace* by Pope John Paul II



Go in Peace, by John Paul II

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About the Author

Karol Józef Wojtyła, pope, poet, playwright, philosopher, was born in 1920 in a small town outside Krakow called Wadowice. Before the Nazis closed his university, he studied drama. During the Nazi occupation of Poland, Karol worked at a quarry, continued his involvement in drama, and studied secretly for the priesthood. He was ordained at the age of 26, consecrated cardinal at the age of 47, and elected pope when he was only 58. Before his ascension to the chair of Peter, he earned a doctorate in theology “with a thesis on the topic of faith in the works of St. John of the Cross” (226). He served as vicar, as university chaplain, and as professor. He attended the Second Vatican Council and contributed to the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. As pope, he produced numerous exhortations and encyclicals. His Wednesday audiences gave us the Theology of the Body. His energy, his optimism, his commitment to Christian unity and to dialogue, his love for the youth, and his witness to the dignity of life: these are some of the outstanding marks of his papacy. Pope John Paul II died on April 2, 2005.

General Overview

Go in Peace is a well-crafted selection of John Paul II’s thought. The editor “drew on a disparate body of material: written documents, accounts of speeches, and English translations of addresses originally delivered in many different languages” (xi). Though the theme of each chapter differs, we can trace certain lines of thought through the whole book. For example, the dignity of man and Christian witness in the world arise again and again. In fact, the book seeks to answer two questions: “*What does it mean to be a Catholic and a Christian today?* and *Why do we believe as we do?*” (x) *Go in Peace* reads almost like a meditation. Each chapter opens with a quotation from Scripture and a related quotation from John Paul II. Likewise, each chapter closes with Scripture and with a prayer written by the Holy Father. These highlight the theme of the chapter and help make this book an easy and enjoyable read.

Chapter One: On Prayer

“When, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, the apostles addressed Jesus with the words, ‘Lord, teach us to pray,’ they were not asking an ordinary question; they were expressing one of the deepest needs of the human heart” (5). Our busy and technological world does not make prayer, which is a necessity, easy. But prayer is the place where we can meet God who alone can fill our hearts. “We need to foster...a contemplative outlook” (6). A contemplative outlook opens our eyes to the meaning and beauty of the world and of each other. It fills one with joy.

“[T]he Holy Spirit not only enables us to pray, but guides us from within prayer.” He guides our prayer so that it “participates in the divine life” (10). In prayer, we come to know the Father.

Though we need “times of explicit prayer,” (12) of which the Sabbath is one, contemplation and action “support each other and yield abundant fruit” (14). Through prayer, may we become as enflamed as the apostles were on Pentecost.

Chapter Two: On Forgiveness and Reconciliation

One’s conscience “needs to be nurtured and educated” (26). One of the prerequisites of forgiveness is truth: we must be honest about what happened. This is why, for the sake of reconciliation among peoples, an unbiased reading of history is so important. Sin is many things. It is an offense against God’s love. It wounds both the sinner and society. It is an act of negative freedom. It is spiritual suicide. God pardons us freely, but He expects us to reform. He also “makes us pray: ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.’ With that *as*, He places in our hands the measure with which we shall be judged by God” (26).

Besides truth, another prerequisite for forgiveness is justice. Justice “looks, above all, to reestablishing authentic relationships with God, with oneself and with the world” (29). Forgiveness is not easy. “[B]ut forgiveness is inspired by the logic of love” (31).

Chapter Three: On Jesus

In the Incarnation of God, “men and women are offered the ultimate truth about their own lives and about the goal of history” (41). The Incarnation gives us a vision of the human person that “has proved to be the cornerstone of a genuinely human civilization” (39). People yearn for God, and in Jesus Christ, “God not only speaks to us, but also seeks us out” (42). He does so because He loves us, because we ran from Him, and because He wants us to overcome evil and share in His own life. “Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (46). Christians, who are convinced of this, lead compelling lives. The pope says, therefore, “Know Jesus” (46). “Try to discover where He is, and you will be able to gather from everyone some detail that will indicate it to you, that will tell you where He lives” (49). The search is hard and Christ is demanding, but the world today needs the gospel.

Chapter Four: On Faith and Belief

“[T]he human being—the one who seeks truth—is also the one who lives by belief” (56). Belief means entrusting “ourselves to the knowledge acquired by other people” (56). It means accepting what God has revealed and what the Church bears witness to. Our faith can be “[m]ixed with suspicions and doubts,” tried by unfriendly attitudes, governments, et cetera. (58). Therefore we pray, “Increase our faith!” (59). “[F]aith is the lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of His commandments, and a truth to be lived out” (61). We must be God’s witnesses, knowledgeable witnesses who study and pray and grow in faith; joyful witnesses; strong and active witnesses. After all, the gospel is nothing less than “the power than can transform the world”! (60)

Chapter Five: On Living in the World

Our late Holy Father acknowledges the world’s progress while deploring its failings, for example, in its disregard for human life as evidenced by abortion and by exaggerated nationalism. Science needs to promote human dignity. “Every culture,” says John Paul II, “is an effort to ponder the mystery of the world...At the heart of every culture is its approach to the greatest of all mysteries: the mystery of God” (80). We must move beyond the fear of difference and must to cultivate “[a] ‘culture of peace’” rather than of war (77). “Tolerance is simply not enough” (77). We must journey in solidarity towards the fullness of truth. The “moral logic that is built into human life...makes dialogue between individuals and people possible” (71). “The new millennium is posing numerous questions to humanity, but it also offers new and unsuspected opportunities. What will the world of the twenty-first century be like?” (81). God speaks to us through His world and faith opens our eyes to His movements.

Chapter Six: On Morality and the Christian Conscience

Some problems in this realm include a misunderstanding of freedom as the right to do as one pleases, as well as a misunderstanding of conscience as the right to decide what is good and what is evil. “Freedom is ordered to the truth, and is fulfilled in humanity’s living the truth” (90). “Moral truth is objective, and a properly formed conscience can perceive it” (93). The laws described in Scripture and the moral norms of the Church are offered to man out of care for man. The Church, it is true, is made of sinners and John Paul II exhorts her members to be truthful in acknowledging their guilt and to make their own the attitude of the tax collector in the Gospel: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (99) God does speak to us in our conscience. “An examination of conscience,” John Paul II asserts, “is one of the most decisive moments in a person’s life.”

Through it, “we discover the distance that separates our deeds from the ideal” (94). While upholding the necessity of forming one’s conscience and following moral norms, the pope also declares that “the personal following of Christ is the essential foundation of Christian morality” (91). That is what morality consists of: “Following Jesus Christ” (92)

Chapter Seven: On the Church

Jesus’s promise that He would be with us always is fulfilled in the Church. “The Church *is* the sacrament – the sign and means” (110) of the world’s reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. “She is the people of God making its pilgrim way to the Father’s house” (119). The Church seeks this reconciliation through prayer, preaching, and pastoral action. The fact that there are many people who do not yet know Christianity calls us all to necessary missionary action. “[I]t is not important where, but how. We can be authentic apostles, in a most fruitful way, at home, at work, in a hospital, in a convent cloister. What counts is the heart that burns with divine charity” (116). The parish offers a fitting venue for missionary activity. The parish is a “Eucharistic community,” (113) “it is the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters,” (113) it is “the ‘village fountain’ to which all...have recourse in their thirst” (115). The parish welcomes and serves all. We should pray for unity among Christians. “The Church needs us to enlighten the world and to show it the path to life...Place your intelligence, your talents, your enthusiasm, your compassion, and your fortitude in the service of life” (120).

Chapter Eight: On the Eucharist and The Mass

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian’s “whole sacramental life” (127). It is the summit because it imparts new, divine life to us. It is the summit because all our “prayers and good works...joys and sufferings” are united to Christ’s and offered to the Father (129). The Eucharist, “which is commonly called the sacrament of love,” is the source of Christian life because it teaches us to love (136). The Eucharist is “a Sacrifice-sacrament, a Communion-sacrament, and a Presence-sacrament” (134). It is a sacrifice that reconciles us to the Father. Through it, we become one body, the Church, and we grow in the image of God and come to respect that image in our brothers and sisters. Finally, the Eucharist is the presence of Jesus Christ Himself. Also, the “Kingdom of God becomes present in the celebration...of the Eucharist” (135). The greatness of the Eucharist is a mystery that we will never fully grasp but which must be fully respected.

Sunday, the Lord’s Day, is our weekly Easter. Since we “are not saved as individuals alone” (133) but as a community, we celebrate the presence of the Risen Lord among us as a community, as the People of God, as “the *Ecclesia*, the assembly called together by the Risen Lord who offered His life to reunite “the dispersed children of God” (134). Sunday points towards and anticipates the meaning of time and history: Christ’s coming again. “In fact,” John Paul II says, “Everything that will happen at the end of the world will be no more than an extension and unfolding of what happened” on Easter Day (130). “[T]he Eucharistic celebration does not stop at the church door...Christ’s disciples return to their everyday surroundings with the commitment to make their whole life a gift, a spiritual sacrifice pleasing to God” (131).

Chapter Nine: On the Family

In this chapter, the Holy Father deplores that “sins against life and love are often presented as examples of “progress” and emancipation” (146). But more than that he calls society to support the family, and he calls the family to be true to itself. “Christian families exist to form a communion of persons in love” (149). The family is the domestic Church in which the Gospel is transmitted to the children and to society. In the sacrament of marriage, the love of the spouses mirrors the love that Christ has for the Church. The Church upholds the indissolubility of marriage which is a symbol and a sign which the world needs, of God’s undying love for His people. John Paul II praises those who have remained faithful, sometimes through much difficulty, to their marriage commitment.

Now we look more closely at the individuals within a family. John Paul II recognizes the contribution of women in history and comments on the burden of marginalization and abuse that women often suffer. With regard to women as mothers in society, we read, “A mother’s presence in the family, so critical to the stability and growth of this basic unit of society [i.e., the family], should instead be recognized, applauded, and supported in every way” (159). “Fathers of families [also] must accept their full share of the responsibility for the lives and upbringing of their children” (146). Children have a special place in the Gospel; Jesus treasures children. Children get their values from their family. Therefore, “the family must be for children the first school of peace” (148). Older people are reminded that their wisdom, time, and sufferings are valued by the Church, and indeed, expected of them by her. Everyone is born into a family. Every healthy culture demands healthy families.

Chapter Ten: On Suffering

“The reality of suffering is ever before our eyes and often in the body, soul, and heart of each of us” (170). Jesus Crucified gives new meaning to suffering by allowing us to share in His redemptive mission. Now, suffering is oriented towards the Resurrection. Suffering becomes a fruitful offering. “Whoever follows Christ...knows that a precious grace, a divine favor, is connected with suffering” (173).

Christians are to have the compassionate heart of the Good Samaritan. God will hold us accountable for our brother. John Paul calls attention to the millions who live in poverty of various kinds. “If each one of us contributes, we can all do something for them. “Of course, this will require sacrifice, which calls for deep interior conversion” (175). Thus, alongside the Holy Father’s exhortation to do good runs a warning against being attached to our goods. The Church’s social doctrine states that the “goods of this world are originally meant for all” (178). Even if we have little, we remember of the widow’s offering and give what we have.

Chapter Eleven: On Christian Vocation and Working in the World

God gives each person the gift of a vocation. We come to discover our vocation gradually through prayer, discernment, and spiritual guidance. Our vocation is given for the edification of the Church and is “never bestowed outside of or independent of the Church” (189). We do not live two lives: a Christian life and secular life. Rather, “every area of our lives, as different as they are, enters into the plan of God” (190). We must “relate human affairs and activities with religious values in a single living synthesis” (199). Christian presence purifies and elevates a culture.

Human work shares in the creative work of God, who declared creation good and who Himself, in the person of Jesus, worked as carpenter. Because of sin, work necessarily involves toil. “The work of salvation came about through suffering and death on a Cross...The Christian finds in human work a small part of the Cross of Christ and accepts it in the same spirit of redemption in which Christ accepted His Cross for us” (193). The right to work, which involves the right to choose one’s occupation, arises from the duty to work, a duty which “expresses humanity’s vocation to service and solidarity” (193). Profit alone cannot mark how well a company is doing. The company must respect its employees’ dignity and needs.

Christians “have a right and duty to participate in public life” (194). Politics can be horribly corrupted, but that does not excuse anyone from participation in public life. “[L]iberty and justice, solidarity, faithful and unselfish dedication for the good of all, a simple lifestyle, and a preferential love for the poor and the least,” (195) in a word, a “spirit of service” (194) must shine in our public actions.

Chapter Twelve: On God the Father

Christian life is like the story of the Prodigal Son. God is the loving and merciful father who rushes to meet us despite the fact that we spurned Him. God speaks to us through His creation and, especially, through Jesus. God, who is love, calls us “to follow Him and to imitate Him along the path of love, a love that gives itself completely to others out of love for God” (212). Jesus is our standard. Imitation of Him, impossible on our own, is possible with the Holy Spirit’s help, with grace. Life belongs to God. He created us, and the sharing in His life to which we are called satisfies the desire of every heart. “Precisely because of their faith, believers are called – as individuals and as a body – to be messengers and artisans of peace” (215). Peace is difficult, but not impossible. It is “a fundamental good that involves respecting and promoting essential human values” (216). Peace is our duty and our prayer.