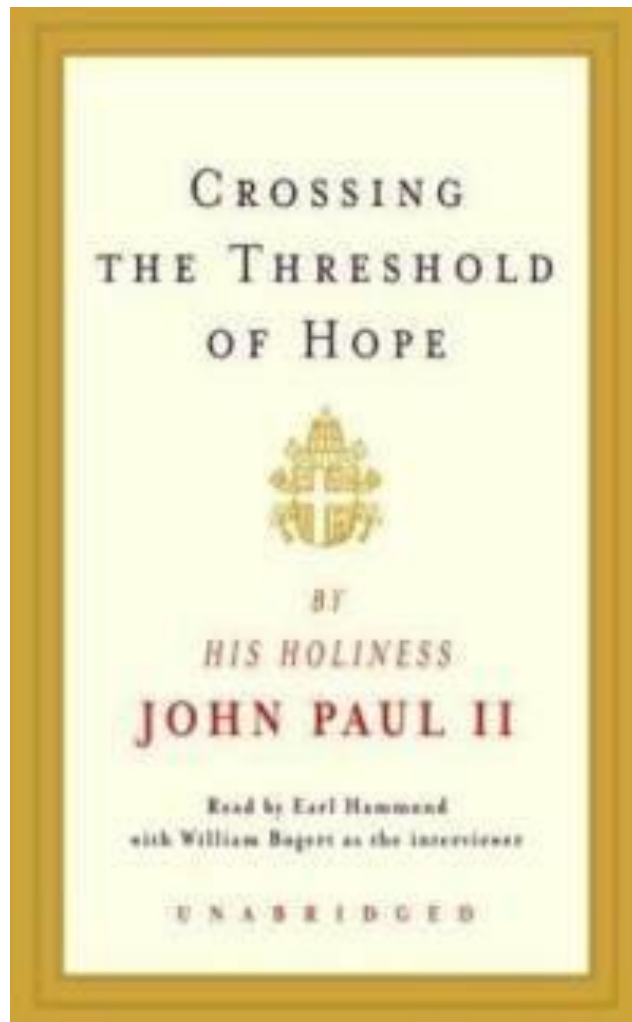


A Summary of *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* by Pope John Paul II



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About the Author

Karol Wojtyła was born in Wadowice, Poland, in 1920. His mother died when he was nine, and his father died in 1941. Wojtyła enrolled in Cracow's Jagiellonian University in 1938, but it was closed by the German occupation in 1939. He worked in a quarry until 1944, and then in a chemical factory to avoid deportation. He began clandestine classes for the priesthood in 1942 and was ordained in Cracow in 1946. He studied further in Rome before returning to Poland, where he was a vicar, chaplain, and continued his studies, becoming a professor at Cracow's seminary and the Catholic University of Lubin. He was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Cracow in 1958, and Archbishop of Cracow in 1964 (reaching the cardinalate in 1967 at a very young age). He took a very active part in the Second Vatican Council. He began his Pontificate as John Paul II in 1978, and became the most traveled Pope in history. He wrote over a dozen encyclicals and many other works. He proclaimed about 1300 new Blesseds and 500 new Saints. He died on April 2, 2005.

General Overview

This book is a collection of interview questions and answers between an Italian journalist named Vittorio Messori and Pope John Paul II in 1994. Originally, the interview was simply intended to be on television, but due to scheduling difficulties, Messori was allowed to write his questions on paper. The Pope graciously wrote longhand answers to each question, and chose the title. The topics range from the office of the Papacy to theology to salvation to other religions and ecumenism to the Second Vatican Council to life issues to women and beyond.

“The Pope”: A Scandal and a Mystery

Confronted with the Pope, who supposedly represents the Son of God, one must wager (like Pascal) that the Pope is either the mysterious proof of the Creator of the universe or the central protagonist of a millennial illusion. Have you ever doubted your belief in Jesus?

Though you have both faith and anxiety, I say, “Be not afraid!” These words of Christ are uttered and repeated by the Pope. We should not fear the truth about ourselves, the truth that we are sinners. Peter – and every Pope – since has known this. Nor should we be afraid of the word “Pope” and the majestic impressions it gives. Christ is the sacrament of the invisible God. Do not be afraid of God who became a man! Peter, however, became afraid for the man who was Son of God, and for this he was severely reproached (but not rejected) by Jesus Christ. Even after the Resurrection, Christ confirmed Peter's mission (“Feed my sheep”), and the Holy Spirit was sent to guide him. On Pentecost, Peter was the first to speak to the gathered people, exhorting them to conversion and baptism. Against this background, terms like “Supreme Pontiff” mean little. Real importance is in the death and Resurrection of Christ.

The Church professes, like Peter, that Christ is “the Messiah, Son of the living God.” This revelation is definitive: one can only accept or reject it. Peter himself had difficulties in pure belief (his famous denials). Many men can believe in One God, but have trouble believing in a Crucified one. Peter and his successors are witnesses of God crucified and risen. But was the choice that you mention so much the easier for Peter or his successors? This choice is not only a human initiative but also an act of God. Such a man who chooses the Lord has only to cast himself on the Lord.

The Pope is called the Vicar of Christ. Christ is present through the ages in his Church, each Christian, priests, and the sacraments. “Vicar of Christ” alludes to service, ministry. Each bishop is also a Vicar of Christ. If, with this title, one refers to the dignity of the Bishop of Rome, one cannot consider it apart from the dignity of the entire college of bishops. Indeed, to be Christian has even greater significance than to be a bishop, even the bishop of Rome.

Praying: How and Why

How can you bear the weight of the Papacy? How can one address Jesus?

Prayer is commonly held to be a conversation between “I” and “thou”. “Thou” is more important, since prayer begins with God. Man, as priest of all creation, allows God, as the protagonist, to free creation from slavery to corruption and lead it toward liberty. Our prayer is always the initiative of God, not our own, and it restores in us our true humanity. One can and must pray in many different ways, and thus the Bible and Psalms are invaluable. Prayer is always a work of glory. Science and technology (since they are human works) can make it difficult for our civilization to be one of life and love since they are not works of glory, can be without Christ. Man achieves the fullness of prayer when he lets God be most fully present in prayer.

How Does the Pope Pray?

The Pope prays as the Holy Spirit permits him to pray, to better fulfill his ministry. The subject of the Pope’s prayer is “the joy and the hope, the grief and the anguish of the people of our time”. The Pope prays that all will come to know the cause of our joy, the joy of salvation, the joy of redemption. The Pope prays like all Christians, but also is called to a universal prayer for all churches every day. The Church prays that everywhere the work of salvation will be accomplished through Christ. The Church prays for the suffering and for the dead. Prayer is a search for God, but also a revelation of God, who reveals Himself as merciful Love.

Does God Really Exist?

The God of the Philosophers is but the fruit of human thought: only the God of Jesus Christ is the living God. The Christian tradition before Aquinas was tied to Plato. Aquinas himself began the *Summa* with this question of God’s existence. *Gaudium et Spes* posits that as people look for the ultimate meaning of man, they will find the meaning of God. “The Church believes...that the key, the center, and the purpose of all of human history is found in its Lord and Master.” A renewal of the thought of Thomas Aquinas is encouraged.

“Proof”: Is It Still Valid?

This thinking is still relevant today, for the positivist mentality of suspicion is beginning to fade: modern man has rediscovered the sacred even if he cannot identify it. All men know that the senses can only take the intellect so far. Human experiences, moral experiences, or religious experiences are also valid forms of discourse. We are witnesses of a symptomatic return to metaphysics (the philosophy of being) and a philosophy of religion through a new anthropology. A fundamental dimension of man’s existence is coexistence: God is the eternal “Thou”.

If God Exists, Why Is He Hiding?

This question is purely rationalistic, stemming from the thought that what one cannot see must not exist. Descartes’ thought (thought determines existence) differs diametrically from Aquinas’ (existence determines thought). Since man alone cannot cross the “gap” to God, are we to assume that more concrete proof of his existence is needed? Interestingly, though, the term “hiding” recalls Moses’ language. God Himself gives us the challenge of “finding” Him, though indeed He has gone as far as He could to “reach” us. Indeed, many religions cannot accept a God who is so human.

Is Jesus the Son of God?

Jesus is not just a wise man, but both God and man: completely unique. He is not like Mohammad or Buddha. Christ is the eternal witness to the Father and the Father's love. From the beginning Christ has been at the center of the faith and life of the Church: an Christological focus. The so-called Apostle's Creed is the expression of the faith of Peter and the whole Church, a faith in Jesus as the Son of God. The apostolic sources and faith of witnesses attest to Jesus as Son of God.

What Has Become of the "History of Salvation"? / The Centrality of Salvation

Why does the history of salvation seem so complicated? In order to pardon us and to save us, did a God who is a loving Father really need to cruelly sacrifice His own Son?

All rationalism can be traced to Descartes, who moved towards an Absolute of autonomous thought, which can only make sense in relation to human thought. He turned his back on metaphysics and moved away from Christianity. Eventually, all that was fundamentally Christian in the tradition of European thought had been rejected. Only the God of the Deists remained, but that God is decidedly outside the world. Man is supposed to live by his reason alone, as if God does not exist. This rationalism strikes at the heart of Christian soteriology, which is really very simple: John 3:16, "God so loved the world." The world is not self-sufficient. Salvation history is really very simple, and embraces the life of every man. It continues to offer new inspiration for interpreting the history of humanity.

Why Is There So Much Evil in the World?

The history of salvation is also the history of man's continual judgment of God, his questions and his doubts of God. But could God have justified Himself before human history, which is so full of evil and suffering, without placing Christ's Cross at the center of that history? God is not some distant Absolute who is indifferent to human suffering. The crucified Christ is proof of God's solidarity with man in His suffering. All individual and collective suffering is not caused by God, but by natural forces or unleashed by man's free will.

Why Does God Tolerate Suffering?

One could say that God is paying for the great gift of free will that He bestowed on humans. But the condemnation of God by man is not based on the truth, but on arrogance. God is always on the side of the weak and suffering, for He is Love. Christianity is a religion of salvation. In order to hope for salvation, man must stop beneath the Cross. Then, on Easter, he must stand in front of the empty tomb and listen: "He is not here, for He has risen."

What Does "To Save" Mean?

"To save" means to liberate from evil, especially a more radical, ultimate evil than even death: God's rejection of man, that is, eternal damnation. Eternal life is happiness that comes from union with God. In salvation, man encounters the absolute fullness of good by knowing God "face to face." God is the fullness of life, and man is drawn to this through Jesus Christ. At the judgment, where there can be an ultimate break of one's communion with God, it is not so much God who rejects man as man who rejects God. God has already embraced all men by the Cross and Resurrection of His Son. Love, above all, possesses a saving power. The fact that Christianity is a religion of salvation is expressed in the sacramental life of the Church and Her liturgy.

Why So Many Religions?

There is a common fundamental element of these religions. All humankind is united with regard to the eternal and ultimate destiny of man: a common spiritual history. Men turn to various religions to explain the human condition. Christianity has borne modest fruit in the East, but ancient cultures remain strong there, resisting Western culture and the Christianity associated with it. In Hinduism and Buddhism, people attempt to look for something beyond this inadequate world. The Catholic Church never rejects what is true in these religions. The primitive, animistic religions also seemed perfect precursors for Christianity, partially since they did not already possess the characteristics of a system. Christ came to redeem and save all.

Buddha?

Buddhism seems to present an “alternative” doctrine of salvation, but in reality the doctrine is opposed to Christianity. Buddha offers a negative soteriology: the conviction that the world is bad and the source of all evil, that one should liberate oneself from external reality. Christianity, on the other hand, draws nearer the goodness of God. Carmelite mysticism begins where Buddhist reflections stop, born of the revelation of the living God who opens Himself to union with man. There is thus an essential difference between the way that Christianity and Buddhism perceive the world. In addition, there is a dangerous return of ancient gnostic ideas under the guise of the so-called New Age.

Muhammad?

Islam is a monotheistic religion with similar roots as Christianity, though the Koran completely reduces Divine Revelation. God is understood as being outside of the world, and there is no room for the Cross and the Resurrection. But it is impossible not to admire their fidelity to prayer. Fundamentalist movements unfortunately interpret human rights and religious freedom in imposing ways, making the situation of Christians very disturbing.

A Minority by the Year 2000

Even after twenty centuries of evangelization, it appears that for the first time Muslims will outnumber Catholics. What divine plan is at work here?

This is somewhat simplistic: some values are not quantifiable. The sociology of religion does not help much here. Mere numbers do not adequately predict the future of a religion. Jesus did not prepare His disciples for easy success, but established a solid foundation for the faith. The Gospel is, at heart, a paradox: to find life, one must lose life. The Gospel is a challenge to human weakness, for man feels the inner need to transcend himself.

What is the “New Evangelization”?

“Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” Paul began the first great evangelization of Europe, giving fine example of evangelizing the Greeks by his speech at the Areopagus in Athens. The Gospel was carried all about the then-known world. Evangelization changed in the course of time as it encountered Gnosticism and heresies. In the first millennium, many peoples came into contact with centers of Christianity during migration. Cyril and Methodius were examples of active, traveling evangelists. Missionary zeal came into the New World. Some Asian and African churches are also remarkably active, evidence of the Church’s ever renewed vitality. The Church continues to struggle for the world’s soul, constantly going out to meet new generations. The Church has always-renewed hope in a new spring of evangelization. The encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* speaks of many of these issues. World Youth Days are also symptoms and catalysts of the new evangelization.

Is There Really Hope in the Young?

Today's young people are the same as ever, though many are growing up in a context without heroism. They live in freedom won by others, and many have yielded to consumer cultures. But we cannot say they have rejected the Church or traditional values. Youth need guides and mentors, showing the fundamental problem of youth to be profoundly personal and communal. They know the call to vocation and love, but they need to be taught love. They seek Christ in many ways, even sinful ones. There is immense potential for good and creative possibility in the young. We need their enthusiasm.

Was God at Work in the Fall of Communism?

Christianity is a religion of knowledge *and* action. In a certain sense, God can be silent, since He has already revealed everything. But many can find God, who is always at work. The Church is a movement, and the Sacraments are the action of Christ in the Holy Spirit. Some do wish to stifle the voice of God. The complex history of Communism can be oversimplified if one says that Divine Providence caused its fall: in a certain sense Communism fell by itself, as a consequence of its own mistakes and abuses. Its medicine was more dangerous than the disease. Responsibility for the rich North and the poor South lies with the struggle against God in our cultures. God is still faithful to His Covenant.

Is Only Rome Right?

There is salvation only and exclusively in Christ and man is saved in the Catholic Church by being brought into the Mystery of the Divine Trinity. Salvation is Christocentric, not Romeocentric. At the heart of the Church is Christ and His Sacrifice. In Christ, the Church is a communion in many different ways, and the active subject of salvation in Christ. People are saved through the Church and in the Church, by the grace of Christ.

The Reaction of the "World"

Today's world does not always receive the Church's teaching eagerly, but the ongoing battle against relativism does not fail. The media, in league with some theologians, have conditioned society to listen only to what it wants to hear. Popularity is not always associated with true doctrine. But which burden is greater: the truth, or the appearance of truth which creates only the illusion of moral honesty? The Church is standing steadfast, and the world, which appears to be evolving past the Church, in reality, is simply moving away from the truth. Our faith in the Church has been strengthened by the Council. The saints of our century have mostly been martyrs, who are always the greatest witnesses of faith.

Does "Eternal Life" Exist?

Lumen Gentium discusses the eschatological nature of the Church. Pastoral practices in the explanations of this nature have been insufficient, however. Sermons on the "Last Things" of heaven, purgatory, hell, and judgment were profoundly personal and had great conversional impact. Man is free and therefore responsible at the time of judgment. The Council also mentions the universal call to holiness in the Church. Until recently the Church taught an individual eschatology, but the Council changed it into a universal eschatology. Secularization makes us insensitive to the Last Things. Hell certainly exists, for Jesus says so, yet the Church has never made any pronouncement as to who has rejected God. Also biblical are the concepts of purifying fire and Heaven. The Church always leads man to eternal life.

What is the Use of Believing?

The usefulness of faith is not comparable to any good, not even one of a moral nature. The basic usefulness of faith lies in the fact that a person believes and entrusts himself, by responding to God's word. The dignity of man is heightened when man seeks the truth. Human freedom is taken very seriously by the Church, but man cannot be forced to accept the truth. The essential usefulness of faith consists in the fact that, through faith, man achieves the good of his rational nature: by giving his response to God. Christ desires our faith for himself and for our good. Even if one does not know the Gospel, it is already at work in one's heart if there is an authentic search for truth, for the Spirit of God respects the freedom of man and blows where He wills. Ultimately, only God can save man, but He expects man to cooperate.

The Defense of Every Life

The right to life is the fundamental right for man. But contemporary culture wants to deny that right. The question of conceived and unborn children is a delicate problem, but a clear one. It is not possible to speak of the right to choose when a clear moral evil is involved. Do not kill! There are sometimes true human tragedies involved, however, so one must become courageously "pro-woman" as well as "pro-life". The Pope is not "obsessed" with this issue, but the issue is of tremendous importance and responsibility. Permissiveness cannot be allowed to trample human rights. Responsible parenthood is needed. Catholic universities and institutes are appropriate places to research, counsel, and teach these principles and their ethical and anthropological foundations.

The Mother of God

Totus tuus. True devotion to the Mother of God is actually Christocentric. The Pope's own Marian devotion began with Marian shrines in his Polish homeland, and has become a total abandonment to Mary.

Women

Marian devotion is also an attitude towards women. Liberal feminism is a reaction to the lack of respect accorded each woman. Revealed truth teaches respect for womanhood. In our civilization woman has become, before all else, an object of pleasure. The spiritual beauty, the particular genius, of women is being rediscovered.

"Be Not Afraid"

This exhortation has a very broad meaning. It is addressed to all people, for we all have been redeemed by God. The power of Christ's Cross and Resurrection is greater than any evil we can fear. Christ's victory came through Mary, and He will conquer through her (Fatima). The whole world needs to hear these words and know their Redeemer. One should not fear the demands of the Gospel, for they never exceed man's abilities. God desires our salvation.

Crossing the Threshold of Hope

The Holy Scriptures urge us to cultivate a fear of God, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The full expression of this fear is Christ Himself. We love God as a Father: this paradigm is ageless. Original sin is a violation of God's will, and attempts to abolish fatherhood. In order to set man free from fear of himself, the world, and others, he must cultivate the true fear of God.