

Comment

Crossing the Threshold of Hope, the Pope's recent book, now that the initial front-shop promotion has ended, is to be found on the hardback non-fiction shelves, in the grandest bookstore in Edinburgh, placed between *Princess in Love* by Anna Pasternak and *Turin Shroud: The Shocking Truth Unveiled* by Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince. Books are evidently arranged, no doubt by computer, according to authors' second names. The princess is, of course, Diana. The shocking truth is that the Shroud, faked at the behest of the Vatican, is a self-portrait by Leonardo da Vinci.

Oddly enough, there is no copy of the Pope's book in the theology section of the store. The jacket design, white edged with shiny gold, suggests something more in place among the kitsch bibles and prayer books in the spirituality and devotion section. In fact, however, the book contains a good deal of tough theology and metaphysics, showing what we knew already from *The Acting Person*, his anti-Cartesian essay, that, if things had worked out differently and he had been forced to emigrate, as many Polish intellectuals were, Karol Wojtyla might have found a chair in philosophy in any American university where phenomenology is honoured. But the reader has to cross the threshold of the opening pages, which certainly do invite comparisons with the Diana cult and with hallucinatory fantasies about the Holy See.

To celebrate fifteen years of his pontificate, the Pope agreed to a live televised interview with a journalist who might ask whatever questions he liked. But the Pope, so we are told, 'did not take into consideration how relentless his schedule would be in September [1993], which was the deadline for filming'. Thus the project fell through. Clearly, he needs a competent young person to take care of his diary. But it turns out that he already had a text of the questions that he was to have been asked 'live', which explains why, some months later, the journalist was surprised to hear from the Press Secretary for the Holy See, who is (we are told) 'a very efficient, cordial, friendly Spanish psychiatrist', that the Pope would be sending a fairly substantial set of written replies to the questions. Hence, then, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, which is now selling in hundreds of thousands of copies in all the major languages. Indeed, the Pope may be overtaking Hans Küng, hitherto the best-selling Catholic theologian by a long way.

The questions are good, but there is a sick-making abject sycophancy about the journalist's approach to the Pope. Worse than that, the very first question seems to reveal something uncomfortably close to the kind of rampant idolatry of the papal office which was ruled out by the First Vatican Council. The Pope is considered, Vittorio Messori says, 162

addressing him directly, to be 'the man on earth who represents the Son of God, who "takes the place" of the Second Person of the omnipotent God of the Trinity'. 'Confronted with you', Messori goes on, 'one must wager, as Pascal said, that you are either the mysterious living proof of the Creator of the universe or the central protagonist of a millennial illusion'. (Where did Pascal say any such thing about the papacy?) He asks, then, as his opening question, whether John Paul II has ever 'hesitated' in his beliefs about his 'relationship with Jesus Christ and therefore with God'—whether he has any 'questions and problems (as is human)', that is to say, about the papal office as thus awesomely described.

The answer is no. Without mentioning, let alone disputing, the more exorbitant phrases, the Pope insists that neither he himself nor anyone else should be afraid when people address him as 'Holy Father' or call him 'Vicar of Christ' or use such titles 'which seem even inimical to the Gospel'. Citing the Lord's own solemn command—'Call no one on earth your father' (Matthew 23: 9–10)—the Pope says that these titles, whatever Christ says, 'have evolved out of a long tradition, becoming part of common usage'. Against the historical background, he goes on to say, expressions such as 'Supreme Pontiff', 'Your Holiness', 'Holy Father', and so on, 'are of little importance'.

As for 'Vicar of Christ', John Paul II relates 'the duties of the Pope in the Church' to his 'Petrine ministry', perhaps thus tacitly preferring to be successor of Peter rather than the place-holder of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. He points out that the Pope is not the only one who is 'Vicar of Christ'. On the contrary, every bishop holds that title with regard to the Church entrusted to him. More profoundly still, 'every Christian is another Christ'. And 'to allay to some degree [Messori's] fears, which seem to arise from a profound faith', the Pope concludes by recalling Augustine's remark to his flock—'I am a bishop for you, I am a Christian with you'—ending as follows: 'On further reflection, *christianus* has far greater significance than *episcopus*, even if the subject is the Bishop of Rome'.

Thus John Paul II parries the journalist's inflated rhetoric about the papal office by referring us towards a post-Vatican II understanding of episcopacy and of the presence of Christ in all baptized Christians. Was it just embarrassment that kept the Pope from questioning the character of this 'profound faith' which seemingly generated such 'fears' about the quasi-divine awesomeness of the papal office? It would be a shame if dismay at Messori's theology put readers off from reading further in the book. It would be a much greater shame if the commercial success of the book reflected nostalgia for Messori's theology of the papacy.

F.K.