

PRINCIPLES

FROM CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

You Will Be My Witnesses



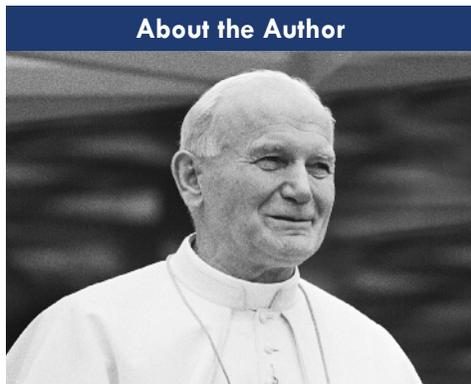
Pope St. John Paul the Great

The following text is from a recently discovered hand-written manuscript written by then-Cardinal Karol Wojtyła between 1965-1966. It was published in English for the first time in 2020. The future pope reflects on St. Paul's sermon in Athens from Acts of the Apostles chapter 17 and uses it as a framework for articulating the Christian faith amidst a culture of unbelief.

1. *“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you”* (Acts 17:23). The words spoken by the apostle at the Areopagus are addressed to a specific audience. But at the same time, these words have a wide range of action and a far-reaching resonance. *Paul of Tarsus proclaims a God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Christ is the eternal Word of God, the Son consubstantial with the Father, the witness of the Trinitarian mystery.*

And at the same time, he is the Son of Man, truly human, born of the Virgin Mary in the “fullness of

About the Author



Pope St. John Paul the Great was born Karol Józef Wojtyła on May 18, 1920, in Poland. Ordained in 1946, he was named bishop of Krakow in 1958 and archbishop in 1964. Wojtyła was an active participant in the Second Vatican Council, became a cardinal in 1967, and in 1978 was elected the first non-Italian pope in more than four hundred years. He died on April 2, 2005, and was canonized on April 27, 2014.

time” (cf. Gal 4:4). Paul of Tarsus is the apostle of the crucified and risen Christ. He preaches in Athens and in all the places of his tireless apostolic journeys throughout the world of that time. In Christ, the “unknown God” makes himself known to humanity. The Athenians, by worshipping the

“unknown God,” turn—according to the apostle—not to someone else, but to the One whom he himself proclaims: to the God who revealed himself in the crucified and risen Christ.

2. Nearly two thousand years have passed since the Athenian event. From generation to generation, *the Church proclaims to humanity Jesus Christ, who “is the same yesterday and today and forever”* (Heb 13:8). The message of the Church continuously reaches new people. Yet the total number of Christians does not exceed 30 percent of the current inhabitants of our planet earth. Thus, the inscription on the Athenian altar “To an unknown god” is still valid, just as the words of Paul continue to be relevant today regarding the One whom humanity—for the most part—“worships as unknown.” There are various reasons for this state of affairs.

3. The Second Vatican Council states that “those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God” (LG, 16). Here, the Church looks, first of all, to the people of the Old Covenant, but also to the followers of Islam who, evoking Abraham’s faith, “along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind” (LG, 16). Belonging to the People of God, according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, extends even further and involves ever wider circles. This “unknown God” of the Pauline sermon at the Areopagus is not only the Creator of all things. He also “desires everyone to be saved

and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). Christ, who redeemed all, is an expression of the Father’s saving will.

Also included as the people of God are “those . . . who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will” (LG, 16). And also “those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life” (the council adds that this, however, is not possible “without divine grace”) (see LG, 16).

4. So how far does the circle of those of whom the apostle at the Areopagus says “worship as unknown” (the true God) extend? It is difficult to answer this question based on human calculations and statistics. The answer is *known to God alone*. Conclusions must be drawn from what the last council teaches about belonging to the Church and “assignment” to the People of God.

5. But even more strongly the call of the apostle thunders: “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16). Since God revealed himself, in his ineffable mystery, in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ entrusted this mystery to the apostles and to the Church, the imperative to proclaim the Gospel to every creature resounds unceasingly: to those to whom the Gospel still is not known, to those who know it insufficiently or do not put it into practice enough, and finally to those who know it but, for various reasons, ignore it. Perhaps it would be necessary in many



places of the contemporary world to construct an altar not so much to the “God unknown,” but to the “God ignored.”

6. “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” The Apostle of Tarsus, and with him the whole Church, from generation to generation, proclaims Christ. He himself said: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). And so *the Church proclaims Christ to make the Father better known.* And at the same time, it proclaims Christ, because *in him the mystery of humankind is fully manifested.* Christ “fully reveals man to man himself” (GS, 22). These two dimensions of the gospel message are closely linked. In Christ, the human being “sees the Father,” and at the same time in Christ the human being meets himself; he discovers the depth of his humanity, and also the full meaning of his existence and calling, which is inscribed in the very fact of being human.

The time in which Jesus of Nazareth carried out his messianic mission was brief. Those who heard and watched him, and especially those who were with him as disciples and apostles, *learned from Christ anew what it means to be human.* This experience reached

the peak of its maturity on the day of Pentecost. From the coming of the Paraclete, from the moment in which they were “baptized in the Holy Spirit,” the proclamation of Christ was fulfilled in them: “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). This proclamation was then fulfilled for generations and generations in all those who “through the word of the Apostles believed in Christ” (cf. Jn 17:20; Acts 4:4, 15:7).

7. *What does it mean “to be witnesses”?* What does it mean to “give testimony”? It means: uniting oneself to Christ to “see the Father” (cf. Jn 14:9) in him and through him. But at the same time, “to be a witness” and “to give testimony” means “to read in Christ the mystery of man.” It means “to be human”: *to read in him the meaning and sense of his own humanity, “to draw from him” under the action of the Spirit of Truth, which in turn continually “draws” from him (cf. Jn 16:13–15).* Christ in his unique and unrepeatable humanity is a gift for all. He is not only the “mirror” in which the human being can see deified humanity but also *a gift that defies the humanity of those who welcome him.* In this way, by virtue of the Holy Spirit, we become “sons in the Son.”

8. Therefore, “being a witness” of Christ means “drawing from his fullness”; somehow entering into that Divinity-Humanity that along with him has become “the way and the truth and the life” (cf. Jn 14:6) of human history, and *from him to discover a new maturity of one’s own humanity, of one’s own person*. In this process of transformation the person does not lose himself, his humanity, or his proper dimension; on the contrary: he finds this humanity and its right dimension. Is not the measure of humanity really “the image and likeness” of God himself?

Christ, once for all and for everyone, has become a “cornerstone” of the actual realization of this fundamental dimension of humanity through the Spirit of Truth.

9. When asked, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” he replied, “*Keep the commandments.*” In fact, the proper dimension of humanity is the moral good, virtue (as the antithesis of evil, of sin). To the question: “What do I still lack?” he replied, “Follow me” (cf. Mt 19:21). This evangelical response, both the first and the second, is always highly relevant. It has universal validity. It is supra-temporal and at the same time concrete. Everyone, guided by conscience, can apply it to himself. People of all ages, education, status, and profession can do it. It speaks to young people and mature adults, as well as to people marked by life, the elderly, and the sick.

In this response, Christ “reveals man to himself” or *rather confirms humanity through the moral virtue* that is fundamental for every individual. Christ’s message to the world embraces all that is humanly true, good, and beautiful. It refers to all areas of human morality and human creativity.

10. The answer, however, is not limited to this dimension alone. When Christ says to the apostles and consequently to all his other disciples from generation to generation: “you will be my witnesses” (cf. Acts 1:8), he indicates another dimension. It is the sacramental dimension through which Christ himself acts in a human being who opens himself to his action in the power of the Spirit of Truth.

“Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament . . . of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG, 1.1), it is in this Church *Christ still works through the sacraments of our faith*: from Baptism to the Sacrament of Confirmation, from the Eucharist to the Sacrament of Reconciliation (or Penance) and to the Anointing of the Sick, through the priesthood and marriage; he always creates the conditions for the human being to learn the fullness of his humanity. At the same time, he creates the conditions for carrying out the apostolic mission: “You will be my witnesses.” May this mission be realized in the varied moments of Christian life, in the different contexts and vocations. May it be realized *through the richness and multiplicity of gifts*: “Each one receives from God a gift . . . his own gift” (cf. LG, 2, 11–12). 

From the Introduction to *Teachings for an Unbelieving World*

Dr. Scott Hahn

Scholars will sometimes treat the apostle's preaching in Athens as opportunistic and almost random. But I maintain that his rhetorical choices were deliberate and artful; they are instructive for those of us who often find ourselves addressing unbelievers—men and women of good will who do not share our assumptions, goals, or religious vocabulary.

Paul trains his attention on two cultural artifacts: an altar and a poem. A *particular* altar and a *particular* poem. Again, his choices do not appear to be random or merely convenient.

Behind both artifacts stands one remarkable, semi-historical, semi-mythical figure. His name is Epimenides. He lived on the island of Crete in the sixth or seventh century before Christ. Epimenides was a shepherd who one day, according to legend, fell asleep in a cave and awoke 57 years later. He emerged from the cave transfigured, filled with divine gifts. Before, he had been a tender of sheep; now he was a prophet, a vatic poet, an inspired lawgiver, and a priest with singular expertise in sacrificial matters. He won renown on his native island, and his fame spread even to the Greek mainland, to the city of Athens, some 214 miles away.

Indeed, the Athenians sent a delegation to call upon him, because the city was in dire peril. One of its leading families, the Alcmaeonidae,



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had violated the sanctuary of a temple, committing murder at the altar in the aftermath of an uprising. Afterward the city was riven by political strife, stricken by pestilence, and visited by strange, unexplainable phenomena. There was general agreement that the Alcmaeonidae had brought a curse upon the city, and the citizens were helpless to overcome it.

The story is preserved in testimonies from leading Greeks of the generations that followed: Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius, Pausanias, Strabo, and others. The episode is treated almost as a refounding of Athens.

When Epimenides arrived in the city, he suggested that perhaps there was a god yet unknown to them, who would be willing and able to help Athens if the appropriate sacrifices were offered. He asked his hosts to bring a number of sheep, some black and some white, to the Areopagus. The prophet then allowed the sheep to roam and graze where they pleased. Wherever a sheep lay down, it was sacrificed to “the god.” (Plato, in his telling of the story, uses the definite article: *ho theos*.) In each of those places, an altar

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was built. Almost a millennium later, Diogenes Laertius noted that these shrines still stood on the Areopagus: “Hence even to this day altars may be found . . . with no name inscribed upon them, which are memorials of this atonement.” So the legacy of Epimenides in Athens was this collection of altars to the unknown god.

His legacy in the wider world, however, was his poetry. In fact, St. Paul quotes one of his poems, citing the author only vaguely as among “some of your poets.” What did Epimenides say in his poem? He said: “In him we live and move and have our being” (see Acts 17:28).

St. Paul apparently sees this line as a prophecy of the filial deification—divine sonship that Christians experience through baptism.

His citation is no happenstance. Paul knew the poem well. In fact, he quotes another line from it in his Letter to Titus, the disciple whom he installed as the first bishop of Crete, Epimenides’s home. “Cretans,” he wrote, “are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons” (Ti 1:12). The line seems different in tone from the one he quoted on the Areopagus, but it comes from the same striking passage, in which King Minos of Crete addresses Zeus, chief among the gods, whom the Cretans thought was mortal.

*They fashioned a tomb for you, holy
and high one, Cretans, always liars,*

*evil beasts, lazy gluttons. But you
are not dead: you live and abide
forever, For in you we live and move
and have our being.*

Paul knew the poem because he was an educated man, steeped in Hellenistic culture—culture that flowed from sources deep in Athenian history and myth. As he faced a crowd of men who were Athenians and philosophers, Paul could have invoked Plato, whose works he surely knew. He could have invoked Aristotle. He could have argued philosophically. But he did not. Instead he consciously, deliberately invited his hearers to remember a poet, a prophet, a priest, and a lawgiver.

He spoke of a figure crucial to the Athenians’ self-understanding—a man whose story was preserved in sources that would have been well known to the educated men on the Areopagus.

To them, Epimenides was a savior figure. First known as a good shepherd, he became a priest, a prophet, and a law-giver. He had been thought dead, but emerged alive from a cave. He was a foreigner who brought atonement to a people who had been suffering under a curse. He purified them of past sins and taught them the proper way to offer sacrifice—not to the gods, but to the god.

Paul didn’t make the connections for his listeners, but he assumed

that it wasn't necessary. Later in life, as he wrote his Letter to Titus, he recognized Epimenides as a "prophet" (Ti 1:12), a most curious and thought-provoking title to give a non-Israelite.

Archbishop Wojtyła followed the subtle movements of the mind of the apostle. Himself a philosopher, he looked at those long-ago academics on their high place—and surely he saw his twentieth-century colleagues. Yet he notes: "The Apostle, however, does not enter the path of philosophical conjectures" (II.3).

Instead, St. Paul appealed to the impulses of natural religion. He appealed to the highest form of justice, known to the philosophers, but more primordial than any philosophy. He reminded them, implicitly, that they had known salvation and atonement through sacrifice.

And then he brought it home. Paul spoke to them of the Paschal Mystery, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

What are we to make of St. Paul's approach? History looks at the last line of the episode and judges the apostle a failure in this instance: "Some mocked; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' . . . But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (Acts 17:32, 34).

But did he fail?

The evidence suggests otherwise. Yes, "some" derided him; but we're told that "others" were at least open to listening in the future.

We can also count at least four converts made that day. Two were notable enough to mention by name: Damaris and Dionysius. Tradition tells us that the latter became the first bishop of Athens; and some of the most profound works of Christian mystical literature—the "Dionysian corpus"—bear his name. There were, moreover, still "others with them." "Others" indicates two at minimum, but perhaps even more.

The more we look at chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles—especially in the company of a guide like the sainted Archbishop Wojtyła—the less it looks like a failure. It looks to me like a plan. **P**

"You Will Be My Witnesses" from Teachings for an Unbelieving World and the introduction by Dr. Hahn were reprinted with permission of the publisher, Ave Maria Press. The italics represent text that was underlined by St. John Paul II in the original handwritten Polish manuscript.

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