



# The Holy See

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PRESENTATION OF POPE JOHN PAUL II'S POETRY  
ENTITLED "ROMAN TRIPTYCH, MEDITATIONS"

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*First Panel: majesty of creation*

The first panel of Pope John Paul II's *Roman Triptych* mirrors the experience of creation, its beauty and its life. The idea of the wooded hills and the even more vivid image of the waters rushing toward the valley, the "silvery cascade, rhythmically falling from the mountain". In this connection several sentences came to mind that were written by Karol Wojtyła in 1976 when he preached the retreat for Paul VI and the Curia. He related the case of a physicist with whom he had carried on a long discussion, and at the end of it had said to him: "from the point of view of my science and its method I'm an atheist...". However, in a letter, the same man wrote: "Every time I find myself before the majesty of nature, of the mountains, I feel that HE exists". One can speak of two different ways of perceiving nature! Certainly, the first panel of the triptych closes almost timidly on the threshold. The Pope does not yet speak directly of God. But he prays, as one prays to a still unknown God. "Allow me to wet my lips in spring water, to feel its freshness, reviving freshness".

With these words he seeks its source and receives directions: "If you want to find the source, you have to go up, against the current". In the first verse of his meditation, he said: "The undulating wood slopes down"; woods and waters have shown a downward movement. His pursuit of the source, however, now obliges him to climb up, to move against the tide.

*Next panels: the end and the beginning, vision of God*

I consider that this is the key to the interpretation of the two following panels. Indeed, they guide

us in the climb upward "against the current". The spiritual pilgrimage, accomplished in this text, leads towards the "Beginning". On arriving, the true surprise is that the "beginning" also reveals the "end".

Whoever knows the origin also sees the "where" and "why" of the entire movement of "being", which is becoming, and exactly in this way, also enduring: "Everything endures, continually becoming". The name of the source that the pilgrim discovers is above all the "Word", according to the first words of the Bible: "God said", which John took up and reformulated in an unmatched way in his Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word". However, the true key word that sums up the pilgrimage in the second panel of the *Triptych* is not "Word", but rather vision and seeing. The Word has a face. The Word - the source - is a vision. Creation, the universe, comes from a vision.

And the human person comes from a vision. This key word therefore leads the Pope while he meditates on Michelangelo, to the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, that have become so dear to him.

In the images of the world, Michelangelo discerned the vision of God: he saw with the creative gaze of God, and, through this gaze, he reproduced on the wall, by means of daring frescoes, the original vision from which all reality derives. In Michelangelo what helps us to rediscover the vision of God in the images of the world there seems to be realized in an exemplary way what all of us are destined to enjoy. The Pope says of Adam and Eve, who represent the human being in general, men and women: "So they too became sharers of that gaze...". Every human person is called to "recover that gaze". The way to the source is a path that leads to becoming seers: to learn from God how to see. Then the beginning and the end appear. Then the human person becomes just.

#### *Epilogue to the second panel: Last Judgement, conclaves*

The beginning and the end - probably for the Pope, a pilgrim journeying inwards and upwards - the link between them appeared obvious there in the Sistine Chapel, where Michelangelo presents to us the images of the beginning and the end, the vision of Creation and the impressive depiction of the Last Judgement. The contemplation of the Last Judgement in the epilogue of the second panel, is perhaps the part of the *Triptych* that moves the reader most. From the interior eyes of the Pope in a fresh way, there derives once again the memory of the conclaves of August and October 1978.

Since I was also present, I know well how we were exposed to those images in the hour of the important decisions, how they challenged us and how they instilled in our souls the greatness of our responsibility. The Pope speaks to the Cardinals of the future conclave, "after my death", and says that Michelangelo's vision will speak to them. The word "con-clave" imposes the thought of the keys, of the patrimony of the keys handed to Peter. To place these keys in the right hands:

this is the immense responsibility of those days. Here we recall the words of Jesus to the lawyers, "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge" (Lk 11,52). Michelangelo urges us not to take away the key, but to use it to open the door so that everyone may enter.

*Second panel: Creation, dialogue in God*

However, let us return to the true centre of the second panel, a look at the "origins". What do people see there? In Michelangelo's work the Creator appears "in the likeness of a human being": the image and likeness of the human person with God is so contrasted that we can deduce from it the humanity of God, that makes it possible to represent the Creator. However, the way of looking that Christ has opened for us directs our gaze far beyond this and shows, by contrast, starting with the Creator, with the beginnings, who the human person really is. The Creator - the beginning - is not, as might appear in Michelangelo's painting, simply the "Almighty Ancient One". Instead, he is "a communion of persons, a mutual exchange...". If, at first, we saw God beginning with man, we now learn to see the human person starting with God: a reciprocal gift of self - the human person is destined for this - if he manages to find the way to achieve this, he is a mirror of the essence of God, and so reveals the link between the beginning and the end.

*Third Panel: Abraham and Isaac's ascent of Mt Moria, total self-giving*

The immense arch, the true vision of the *Roman Triptych*, is clearly revealed in the third panel, the ascent by Abraham and Isaac of Mount Moria, the mountain of the sacrifice, of the self-gift without reservation. This ascent is the last and decisive stage in Abraham's journey, that began with his departure from his own land, Ur of the Chaldeans; it is the basic stage of the ascent toward the summit, against the current, to the source that is also the goal. In the inexhaustible dialogue between father and son, consisting of few words and of bearing together, in silence, the mystery of the words, all the questions of history, the suffering, fears and hopes are reflected. In the end it becomes clear that this dialogue between father and son, between Abraham and Isaac, is the dialogue in God himself, the dialogue between the eternal Father and his Son, the Word, and that this eternal dialogue represents at the same time the response to our unfinished human dialogue.

Indeed at the end, Isaac is saved - the lamb is a mysterious sign of the Son who becomes the Lamb and a sacrificial victim, thus revealing to us the true face of God: the God who gives himself to us, who is entirely gift and love, to the very end (cf. Jn 13,1). Thus in this very concrete event of history, which seems to take us so far from the great visions of creation in the first panel of the *Triptych*, there appears clearly the beginning and the end of all things, the link between the descent and ascent, between the source, the way and the end of the journey: we recognize God who gives himself, who is simultaneously the beginning, way, and final goal. This God appears in creation and in history. He seeks us in our sufferings and in our questioning. He shows us what it means to be a human person: to give ourselves in love, which makes us like God. Through the journey of the Son to the mountain of sacrifice, there is revealed "the mystery hidden from the

foundations of the world". The love that gives is the original mystery, and, in loving, we too can understand the message of creation and find the way.

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