

THE CHALLENGE OF PEACE



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In considering the difficult times we are going through, with a “piecemeal world war”, as Pope Francis defines it, it is worth looking at a recent past, equally complex, such as that of the 1970s and 1980s, when the Cold War gave way to a thaw thanks to a handful of men who had the courage to dialogue to achieve an improvement in international relations and peace between peoples.

When John Paul II, the first Slavic Pope in history, on 2 June 1979, eight months after his election, returned to Poland for the first of many visits to his homeland, no one could have imagined that, within ten years, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, communism would collapse with its tragic utopias.

I was a witness to that extraordinary journey, which I followed as a correspondent for TG1, RAI, as I would follow other events of that crucial phase of our history, such as the civil war in Lebanon and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It is paradoxical that the Taliban, whom Washington had helped to win against the Red Army, would then become those who would put the Americans in a position to hastily and shamefully abandon the country in May 2021.

Wojtyla returned to Poland, the Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party was Leonid Brezhnev, who died in 1982, after eighteen years in the Kremlin, while in the White House there was Jimmy Carter, elected in 1976, in office until January 1981, President who was supposed to manage the crisis of the American hostages in the embassy in Tehran after the assault on the diplomatic headquarters by a group of students during the Iranian revolution. The 52 American diplomats were held hostage from November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981. An attempt by the Pentagon to intervene with a blitz for their release was a tragic failure.

This was the climate of full “cold war” that was experienced at an international level at that time. Karol Wojtyla’s first trip to his homeland was compared by the Kremlin leaders to the return to Tehran of Ajatollah Khomeini in 1979 after a long exile in Paris. The response was not long in coming: on the eve of the Pope’s visit to Istanbul in November 1979, Ali Agca, an assassin from the Grey Wolves organization, the Turkish far right, surprisingly escaped from a maximum security military prison announcing that he wanted to kill Pope Wojtyla. It was evidently a way to pre-establish an alibi for the failed attack in St. Peter’s Square on May 13, 1981 with the support of Bulgarian diplomats in Rome. The Yalta agreements were not to be called into question by the Polish Pope.

Dramatic moments therefore, in which however the foundations were laid for a virtuous path that would lead to the unexpected agreements between Ronald Reagan, in the White House since January 1981, and Mikhail Gorbachev, in the Kremlin in 1985 after the brief management of two Secretaries of the Soviet Communist Party, Andropov and Chernenko, both of whom died just over a year after their appointment between 1982 and 1985, almost as confirmation of the collapse of a regime. The Reykjavik Summit, on 11-12 October 1986, remains in history, which ended without any agreement but which constituted a fundamental step towards a progressive reduction of armaments and the end of the “Cold War”.

Gorbachev was the new man, the inventor of Perestroika and Glastnost, "restructuring" and "transparency", political-social and economic reforms aimed at reorganizing the economy and the social and political structure of the country. From that moment, in a crescendo of relations, Moscow, Washington and the Holy See together triggered a virtuous mechanism that led to a thaw and a constructive dialogue that would lead in May 1988 in Moscow to the ratification by Reagan and Gorbachev of the disarmament agreements, the INF Treaty (Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty) that sanctioned the end of the use of medium-range nuclear missiles on European soil.

It is incredible that, 36 years later, NATO and Europe in particular risk a nuclear conflict if a negotiating table is not organized, while Putin increases his army to almost two and a half million men. Without dialogue, their predecessors teach, peace is impossible.

We wonder how this involution was possible, which can trigger a dangerous confrontation with no return. The causes are multiple and this is not the place to delve into this situation. It is certainly also a question of men: Putin, who succeeds Yeltsin, - whose so-called "friendly" meetings with Bill Clinton we remember - has been in power from 1999 to today except for the four years of Medvedev's due Presidency from 2008 to 2012. And Putin, nostalgic for Tsarist Russia, does not seem to want to give up his seat. And to think that he had entered, with the G8, the assembly of the Great of the Earth with the Birmingham summit in 1998, and that he participated in the NATO summit in Pratica di Mare in 2002 thanks to the auspices of Silvio Berlusconi. Biden, for his part, at the end of a complicated Presidency, is neither Reagan nor Bush nor Clinton.

I had the opportunity to interview the protagonists of that virtuous period, starting with John Paul II, who explained to me, at the end of his first visit to Poland, how he had been struck by the great participation of the people and the enthusiasm with which they had welcomed the Polish Pope, participation and enthusiasm that Karol Wojtyla attributed in large part to the faith of an entire people - especially the young - to whom, on the day of his arrival, in front of a million people in Victory Square in Warsaw he said that "it is not possible to erase Christ from the history of man, it is an act against man himself". The Slavic Pope prophetically saw Europe "breathing with two lungs", a Europe of the Spirit, which had to recover its Christian roots. The fundamental role of Pope Wojtyla, with his moral authority, was confirmed to me by the same co-protagonists of that extraordinary story, Reagan, Bush, whom I interviewed in Houston in 1993 immediately after Clinton's victory, and Gorbachev, whom I interviewed in Moscow in the same period. The consideration that those great leaders expressed towards John Paul II struck me very much: they considered Wojtyla the highest moral authority of the time, underlining the importance of the role he had played in that epochal transition that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"Marxism," said Saint John Paul II, "had promised to eradicate the need for God from the heart of man, but the results have shown that it is not possible to succeed without upsetting the heart".

A man not of apparatus, but of mission, John Paul II considered the world as a great Areopagus, be it a hut in the heart of Africa or the General Assembly of the United Nations, the Areopagus par excellence, from which the Pope proposed a "qualitative leap" in international life, a new concept of "rights of Nations": the United Nations not a simple political or diplomatic "organization" of States, but "a true family of nations". A leap in quality that must see young people as protagonists, whom in "Novo Millennio Ineunte", the apostolic letter of January 6, 2001, defined them as "the sentinels of the morning at the dawn of the new Millennium".