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## Faith and Reason: A Response to Pope John II's Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*

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ROBERT ROYAL

*Faith and Reason:  
A Response to Pope John II's  
Encyclical Fides et Ratio*

I would first like to thank Msgr. Gregory Smith and the Institute for Religious Education and Pastoral Studies here at Sacred Heart University for putting together this event. Sacred Heart is a particularly appropriate venue for this conference. Just this time last year, when the Holy Father made his pilgrimage to Cuba, the one image that the Cuban regime allowed publicly for the celebration was a large picture of the Sacred Heart in the Plaza of the Revolution with the caption, "Jesus, I trust in you." That was the heart of the message the Holy Father brought to the Cubans and the many pilgrims, including myself, who were also there, felt greatly moved by it. I also have a personal tie to this place. When I was growing up not far from here, this campus was already a site for serious religious and secular education. It is a special pleasure for me to be back again here for an event of this kind.

The Holy Father begins his wonderful reflections on faith and reason with a beautiful image. They are, he says, "like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth." To anyone familiar with the classical tradition, this image will recall similar images in Plato, where two wings or two horses or other metaphors are employed to try to give some sense of the way that the soul aspires to something that, tragically, the classical philosophers were unable to name. The great American poet Wallace Stevens, who, as a Connecticut native myself, I claim as a Connecticut poet, once characterized images like these as Plato's "gorgeous nonsense."<sup>1</sup> That was long before Stevens' quiet deathbed con-

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version at a hospital in Hartford, by which time he may still have believed in the gorgeousness, but certainly had had second and third

thoughts about the nonsense.

The Holy Father's opening reminded me of one of the most moving statements about the condition of the human race before the advent of revelation. In Plato's *Phaedo*, you will recall, Socrates is about to be executed and is discussing with his friends the immortality and destiny of the soul. The great man, standing in the very shadow of death, observes:

Precise knowledge on that subject is impossible or extremely difficult in our present life, but . . . it surely shows a very poor spirit not to examine thoroughly what is said about it, and to desist before one is exhausted by an all-round investigation. One should achieve one of these things: learn the truth about these things or find it for oneself, or, if that is impossible, adopt the best and most irrefutable of men's theories, and, borne upon this, sail through the dangers of life as upon a raft, unless someone should make that journey safer and less risky upon a firmer vessel of some divine doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

We are fortunate that we have been given such a "firmer vessel" in the Old and New Testaments. Socrates and the whole pagan world did not know them, but they clearly yearned for such a gift. We have not only neglected the gift, often forgetting the great liberation it brought to the human race; we have for some time shown the "very poor spirit" of which Plato speaks in that we have not even valued the instruments of human intelligence nearer to hand.

As both John Paul and Socrates believe, that desire to know, which can only find its final satisfaction in God, is built into us, whether we pay attention to it or not. So the recovery of the rational search and of the transcendence of reason in faith are not abstract undertakings that only learned theologians or philosophers or popes think about. It happens all the time in humble individuals, even when social conditions are unfavorable. Our main task at present, it seems, is not so much to urge people to undertake something that they do not wish to do. Rather, it is to free the natural, God-given energies already within us from narrow and constricting limits. In most cultures at most

times, those energies and the search they lead to have been highly valued. It is largely only in developed societies that the most basic truth has become obscured. We think our indifference is natural, but it is both unnatural and a minority position for the human race. John Paul wants us to understand that the two ways to truth belong intimately together.

That is why I believe the Holy Father continues in his encyclical with the observation that the desire to "know thyself" and through yourself, God, is not restricted to West or East, Catholic or Protestant, Christian or Jew or Muslim or Hindu or pagan. Catholicism, I think it is fair to say, has made as determined an effort through the centuries as any tradition to bring reason and faith into the right relation. But, at least at a first glance, recognizing the importance of that relation does not require the formal acceptance of faith. It is one of the constituent elements of being fully and freely human.

We have had tragic confirmation of the consequences of reason closed in on itself in this century. Nazism and Fascism represented one wing of this problem, Communism another. Karol Wojtyla experienced both of these aberrations in his native Poland and it seems to have been one of his intellectual projects, long before he became pope, to inquire into why, precisely, these currents of thought, which were believed to be solutions to modern problems, turned out to be great horrors. I would not leave out, and neither does John Paul II, the ways in which developed Western societies are increasingly closing themselves off from their transcendent roots. In part, we might attribute this to materialism, greed, consumerism – all the ills we frequently deplore. But these constant temptations could not have attained dominance in our societies had not the way been prepared by intellectual errors that have narrowed the human horizon.

While part of the current situation is an intellectual problem, we also have to recognize that it also involves a question of will. I cannot here go very deeply into the history of modern philosophy, but I believe it would be fair to say that for some centuries philosophy has been marked by two impulses: one, the wish to achieve a totalizing rationality, and the other, the desire to exert mastery over ourselves and nature. Some of the byproducts of those impulses have led to undeniable goods. As John Paul affirms, modern science has brought us many blessings, and our growing knowledge of ourselves and

human societies promises further gains. But Cardinal Newman warned a century ago that the growth in human knowledge demanded a corresponding "increment of soul" if we wish our knowledge to remain in the service of the highest things. Unfortunately, it more typically has led to the will to total human autonomy. Autonomy of that kind – free of any constraints in nature or nature's God – was for most pagan philosophers unintelligible, and is to the Christian believer the whole root of our alienation from God.

The strong critiques that have been directed against what we may call Enlightenment rationality by postmodern thought I think are pointing in the right direction, and the Holy Father makes reference to some ways that certain postmodern currents may be useful. Enlightenment rationality was a narrow form of rationality that took one kind of reason about human beings and the world as exhausting reality. But it is clear that we also need to be careful about the critique of that rationality and not throw out the baby with the bath water. For all their shortcomings, the main Enlightenment figures, even the often decried Descartes, continue to have human value, when they are properly contextualized. But their main historical effect was to present us with a mistaken view of human nature and of nature itself. I would trace some of our social and environmental problems to those mistaken notions of total mastery.

But that said, we must immediately guard against the opposite extreme. My experience of modern academic philosophers and other theorists is that they show a far greater irrationality on the one hand and fideism on the other than is healthy or even tenable. I have argued with people about the existence of universal truths and been told that, in an Einsteinian universe, everything is relative. Similarly, some postmodernists hold uncritically to the position that all truths are socially constructed. In a sense, of course, each of these positions is true, but only up to a point, and without complementary truths, they simply become false. Slavery, for example, is a practice that violates the universal truth about the respect due to human beings. Opposition to slavery remains unaffected by discoveries about space-time or the sociology of cultures. Most of us recognize as much not only about slavery but a host of other truths. We are less certain, owing to the way in which the intellectual pendulum has swung to one extreme, about how to ground truths that only the most corrupt among us would deny.

The Pope briefly sums up some of the things that any philosophy worthy of the name would want to include:

Consider, for example, the principle of non-contradiction, finality, and causality, as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject, with the capacity to know God, truth, and goodness. Consider as well certain fundamental moral norms which are shared by all. These are among the indications that, beyond different schools of thought, there exists a body of knowledge which may be judged a kind of spiritual heritage of humanity. It is as if we had come upon an *implicit philosophy*, as a result of which all feel that they possess these principles, albeit in a general and unreflective way. Precisely because it is shared in some measure by all, this knowledge should serve as a kind of reference-point for the different philosophical schools. (§4)

For all of us, the recognition that transcendent truths exist opens up a challenge. In many of the postmodern figures, the discovery that Enlightenment reason was not self-grounded has led to a fascination with the "abyss," which is taken to undermine all settled truths. Those of us familiar with the Christian tradition know there is another way to look upon that point at which our knowledge falls away into infinity. Philosophy, as the old Aristotelian saying goes, begins in wonder. And for him as for John Paul, the opening to wonder may lead us upward into infinite light as much as downward into total skepticism or a pale relativism. From that perspective, not to be stimulated into soaring speculation by the world in which we live, even if it does not lead to the sort of academic philosophy most people think exhausts philosophy itself, means we are somehow inert before the universe, not sophisticated and beyond superstition, as we sometimes believe.

This raises a number of questions specifically for the intellectual disciplines. Physics, of course, will continue to be physics, psychology to be psychology, history, literature, and medicine to have their own professional standards. But holding open the possibility that what transcends the human disciplines may make a difference within those

disciplines itself is something that, with great care, we must all try to do. Otherwise, we will be saying in advance that human reason is closed and limited. That kind of reductionism has stunted several fields. Opening them up need not only open the abyss, it may enable other truths to be discovered. A priest friend of mine first introduced me several years ago to a phrase that the French often use to express our state as Christians: *déjà mais pas encore*, which is to say our ultimate salvation is already activated but not yet finished. I've always thought that this parallels what is good in the postmodern critique, how there is "always already" something before us, but our discourse about it remains incomplete in this life. Viewed from the right angle, it might turn the thrill of abyss towards the thrill, not unmixed with fear of its own, of the sublime.

It is useful to see all these issues in a broader historical context. What we have in *Fides et Ratio* is a document as important, and perhaps more so, than Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. As many of you know, that was the encyclical that encouraged a renewed study of Aquinas both as a philosopher/theologian who would help fortify the Church and as a representative of the natural law tradition that Leo thought important to modern societies. John Paul mentions it as an important contribution by one of his great predecessors, but it is clear that his own addition to this tradition is even more wide-ranging.

He, too, recommends the study of Aquinas. For those of us familiar with the Catholic tradition we may be too quick to think we already know what he means. I would point to two main themes in Aquinas that might guide our reflections. First, in the *Contra Gentiles*, which is meant as a more pastoral text than the great *Summa Theologiae*, we find a St. Thomas who provides us with some useful approaches to truth. He says there that if we are arguing with people, we should begin with the truths they already accept. For heretics, this means the whole Bible; for Jews, the Old Testament; for Muslims, the Scriptures they accept; and for pagans, natural reason.<sup>3</sup> In other words, we begin with them a conversation about truth that already assumes that we and they share both some particular truths and a desire to know more.

Interestingly, Thomas also asks whether God revealed some truths that we could know by natural reason. He answers yes, because, he says, most people are not philosophers, the questions themselves are

often difficult and susceptible to many errors of reasoning, and our daily occupations make it difficult for most of us to devote time to philosophy. This is not merely some medieval nicety. Thomas rightly says that it is a mercy from God that we get guidance from revelation about what we might be able to know ourselves were human reason not wounded and weakened after the Fall.<sup>4</sup> In that respect, revelation not only transcends reason, but aids us to reason better. The great transcultural truths about morality, for example, which appear in the Ten Commandments and the moral codes of virtually every culture, are thus not merely particular or external laws but a reminder of central truths about human nature. To trust those, as John Paul says, is to enter into a relationship of trust, not blindly, because that would be to risk idolatry, but with a full recognition that truths so widely held by the race that have proven themselves in many different contexts deserve our *prima facie* respect, even as we seek to take them further (§32).

The Holy Father speaks specifically about Thomas' *method*. And again we may be too quick to assume we know what he means. In the *Summa Theologiae* we see another dimension of Thomas that we would do well to imitate. Unfortunately, Thomas was often presented at Catholic institutions in the past as a kind of dogmatic answer to all questions. Nothing could be further from his method. If you look at the structure of an article in the second *Summa*, you see that he first lays out all the available positions on a disputed question. The disputes may be about apparent contradictions in Scripture or seemingly opposed secular truths. But whatever the material, he wants to begin with the widest possible consideration of the question. He then responds by seeking to apply reason and faith to arrive at a comprehensive, balanced view – what I would call wisdom. The Holy Father cites the beautiful passage from the Book of Wisdom to tell us why the wise person loves wisdom: “He camps near her house and fastens his tent-peg to her walls; he pitches his tent near her and so finds an excellent resting-place; he places his children under her protection and lodges under her boughs; by her he is sheltered from the heat and dwells in the shade of glory” (Wis. 14:20-27). For us it is important to know what Thomas wrote and the positions he finally arrived at because they are often the wisest solutions to given problems. But in our circumstances we also need to follow Thomas'

method.

Human advances have placed all kinds of new data, arguments, whole disciplines before us that were unknown to earlier ages. And to be faithful to Thomas' method we need to take into account all of those truths and then seriously wrestle with them. This is not always a comfortable exercise. Any real intellectual knows that his or her works leads into temporary contradictions, blind alleys, and conundrums that most people do not face. Yet if our Catholic desire for truth is to remain Catholic, we must willingly welcome those struggles, because humanly speaking we have no other means to truth.

And this is not only a private exercise. The whole tradition of modern Catholic social thought may fairly be thought of as rooted in Leo's philosophical restoration. In his day, he thought it should lead to a proper Catholic appreciation of the value of democracy and other modern achievements. John Paul took all that for granted when he began to write his own vigorous encyclicals. But his scope is even wider. Given that we all, in one way or another, now accept democracy, human rights, and freedom of conscience, he is moving on here – as he also did in *Evangelium Vitae* and *Veritatis Splendor* – to warning that without the intellectual tools to defend certain truths about the human person, we will not be able to defend those public practices that we value highly.

And for that he not only recommends St. Thomas, but encourages us to explore all philosophical schools, as he himself has done. As many of you know, John Paul was a prominent European participant in modern phenomenology before his election as pope. Phenomenology is a technical way of saying that a full philosophy will want to take into account all the phenomena we perceive, "saving the appearances" as the old philosophical tag put it. The Pope was particularly attracted to such currents in modern philosophy because they promised a way out of the old modern philosophical problem of "thinking about thinking about thinking," a turn within that did not seem to allow a place for many important truths.

His own work intellectual work began with a dissertation he wrote while he was still a student in Rome, now unfortunately out of print, in which he was already thinking about the faith/reason question.<sup>5</sup> In it, he analyzes how the profound mysticism of St. John of the Cross and the rational ferocity of St. Thomas relate to one another. But as is clear

from the encyclical, John Paul does not believe we need to limit ourselves to Carmelite contemplation, Thomism, or phenomenology. We have a whole world of other approaches to truth and ought to avail ourselves of those riches for what every approach may add to the human adventure. Obviously, some of these approaches to truth will be more congenial, others less so to the Catholic faith and the fullness of reality.

I believe we also have to recognize the particular nature of our moment in history. The contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has argued in his powerful book *After Virtue* that we now exist in a fragmented condition in which the various philosophical traditions can no longer speak to one another.<sup>6</sup> He is right – about our current situation. But it may not be that the condition he describes is permanent. Certainly John Paul believes that there are ways for us to enter into dialogue, even though it may take an enormous amount of work for us to get to that point.

Given the accumulation of philosophical reasoning over millennia, most philosophers have come to recognize what people of faith have always understood: that reason itself is limited and cannot give us full human knowledge of transcendent reality. That is an important achievement for human reason. The problem is, however, that unlike some of the great philosophers of the past this truth has led many contemporary philosophers into simply forgetting about the crucial metaphysical verities that reason must learn, or at least approach, as we saw in Plato's urgings. Philosophy has modestly seen its own limits. But there may be an excessive modesty in its decision to deal only with those matters easily accessible to reason.

We need a much more vigorous and ambitious philosophy that, while recognizing its limits, will boldly seek out transcultural and eternal truths. In a world that has begun a slow ascent towards a global culture, that ambitiousness is necessary both to order the human world and prevent that world from closing in on itself in dangerous ways. In this country and some of the international forums where I work, the danger has become evident. I myself believe that the Church's insistence on the dignity of human life at every stage will come, in time, to be seen as a glorious corrective to a narrower view, even though sometimes well-intentioned, that believes certain lives may be eliminated – through abortion, euthanasia, coercive population

programs, and many other ways – for essentially pragmatic purposes.

This leads me to my conclusion: what I regard as our special role as Americans in the process the Pope describes. We are an unusual nation in that there are American citizens whose origins lie in every culture on earth. Our great respect for pluralism makes it possible, at least in theory, for those different cultures to contribute to our public life. We have developed something of a democratic etiquette that allows such public debate to occur in relative peace. At the same time, we are a nation whose very founding stands, as the Declaration of Independence asserted, on "the laws of nature and nature's God" as well as truths about God and man that we hold to be self-evident. The great American theologian John Courtney Murray once said that these assertions tell us three basic things: that there are truths, that we can know them, and that we Americans hold them.<sup>7</sup> Others may dispute whether self-evident truths even exist or what the import of those truths may be for our situation. But those of us who take both our faith and our public life seriously cannot escape returning again and again to profound questions.

This means we have a calling that is both high and difficult. At this point in history, we are only at the beginning of a global culture that will seek to reconcile universality and particularity, the demands of faith and the demands of public reasons. But we have good reason to think that in the new millennium there will be a strong resurgence of such issues. They are built into us as human persons and cannot be repressed forever. The evidence from the twentieth century, which is coming to a close, of what happens when we ignore them is too palpable. In that sense, John Paul may not be so much an analyst of our current situation as a prophet of what, inevitably, the human race will need to do in the near future to fulfill its God-given destiny both in this world and the world to which we – slowly, with many errors, yet with great hope – still continue to make our way.

#### Notes

<sup>7</sup>See Wallace Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1965).

<sup>2</sup>See the comments leading up to this text in Luigi Giussani's *The Religious Sense* (Quebec: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1997), chapter 14, "Religion's Thrust: Into the Unknown."

<sup>3</sup>Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, translated with an introduction and notes by Anton C. Pegis, FRSC (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1975), I, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup>Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup>Karol Wojtyła, *Faith According to Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Jordan Aumann, O.P. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981).

<sup>6</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1981).

John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).