

FAITH AND REASON: TWO WINGS ON WHICH THE HUMAN SPIRIT

RISES TO THE CONTEMPLATION OF TRUTH

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In order to explain what are the things science can contribute to faith and what adjustments must scientists and philosophers do today to return to a philosophy which can serve as a true handmaid of theology, let us first begin with the words of Pope John Paul II from his Encyclical Letter Faith and Reason (*Fides et Ratio*). At the beginning of this document, he so wisely said the following words: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth". These two sentences summarize the relationship between faith and reason so perfectly.



Through philosophy's work, the ability to speculate which is proper to the human intellect produces a rigorous mode of thought; and then in turn, through the logical coherence of the affirmations made and the organic unity of their content, it produces a systematic body of knowledge. In different cultural contexts and at different times, this process has yielded results which have produced genuine systems of thought. Yet often enough in history this has brought with it the temptation to identify one single stream with the whole of philosophy. In such cases, we are clearly dealing with a "philosophical pride" which seeks to present its own partial and imperfect view as the complete reading of all reality. In effect, every philosophical system, while it should always be respected in its wholeness, without any instrumentalization, must still recognize the primacy of philosophical enquiry, from which it stems and which it ought loyally to serve.¹

As we learned from our notes, John Paul II reflects at the beginning of his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* about the fact that the Church has always been the friend of reason. And, this is a truth we have always known.

It should be clear that the Church in no sense underestimates the contribution human reason and science can make to the study of revelation. Instead, the Church insists that all the disciplines which comprise human philosophy and science have their own objects and their own methods. This is not the method of faith.² The Church highly believes in the contribution which philosophy can bring into our faith. We have seen it, especially in the works of the great Doctor of the Church, Saint Thomas Aquinas.

We also studied from our lectures that some of the things which science can contribute and has contributed to our faith is in the area of human psychology which provides for us a better understanding of the spiritual life. Science can also help in understanding the cosmos. Faith reveals to us that God created the universe, science can highlight how God created it. The word science comes from the Latin word "scientia," meaning knowledge. Science is a way of coming to know things. Therefore, science can support our belief in God. Saint Albert the Great is a great example of a priest and a great scientist. He was also known as one of the Fathers of the Scientific Method. He experienced God through the created things, because Creation speaks to us of God. He knew that science and faith were not in conflict with each other, on the contrary, he knew that all science came from God, therefore, they both worked together.

Advances in modern science have greatly aided in the appreciation of what is taught by faith. Discoveries in human psychology for example can lead to a more developed appreciation of what is happening in morals. The further exploration and understanding of the cosmos in both the greater bodies and the smallest particle of matter can bring a greater appreciation of the majesty and power of the Creator. A priest is the author of the modern science of genetics. Monks preserved the wisdom of the ages regarding medicine and other things from classical culture.³

Furthermore, As Pope John Paul II says in his encyclical, "*that reason (purified and rightly tuned) could rise to the higher planes of thought, providing a solid foundation for the perception of being, of the transcendent and of the absolute*". In other words, he is speaking of a reason which is open to the absolute,

which is so necessary in today's world and it is precisely what the human being is yearning for.

On her part, the Church cannot but set great value upon reason's drive to attain goals which render people's lives ever more worthy. She sees in philosophy the way to come to know fundamental truths about human life. At the same time, the Church considers philosophy an indispensable help for a deeper understanding of faith and for communicating the truth of the Gospel to those who do not yet know it.⁴

It is evident that science can contribute so much to religion, and by the same token, religion can contribute so much to science. They go hand in hand. They both need each other. Pope John Paul II puts it so eloquently in his encyclical as follows: "*The fundamental harmony between the knowledge of faith and the knowledge of philosophy is once again confirmed. Faith asks that its object be understood with the help of reason; and at the summit of its searching reason acknowledges that it cannot do without what faith presents*".

Theology in fact has always needed and still needs philosophy's contribution. As a work of critical reason in the light of faith, theology presupposes and requires in all its research a reason formed and educated to concept and argument. Moreover, theology needs philosophy as a partner in dialogue in order to confirm the intelligibility and universal truth of its claims. It was not by accident that the Fathers of the Church and the Medieval theologians adopted non-Christian philosophies. This historical fact confirms the value of philosophy's *autonomy*, which remains unimpaired when theology calls upon it; but it shows as well the profound transformations which philosophy itself must undergo.⁵

Men and women have at their disposal an array of resources for generating greater knowledge of truth so that their lives may be ever more human. Among these is *philosophy*, which is directly concerned with asking the question of life's meaning and sketching an answer to it. Philosophy emerges, then, as one of noblest of human tasks. According to its Greek etymology, the term philosophy means "love of wisdom". Born and nurtured when the human being first asked questions about the reason for things and their purpose, philosophy shows in different modes and forms that the desire for truth is part of human nature itself. It is an innate property of human reason to ask why things are as they are, even though the answers which gradually emerge are set within a horizon which reveals how the different human cultures are complementary.⁶

Now, as far as what adjustments must scientists and philosophers do today to return to a philosophy which can serve as a true handmaid of theology, Blessed Pope John Paul II recommends three requirements in his encyclical.

To be consonant with the word of God, *philosophy* needs first of all to recover its *sapiential dimension* as a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life. This first requirement is in fact most helpful in stimulating philosophy to conform to its proper nature. In doing so, it will be not only the decisive critical factor which determines the foundations and limits of the different fields of scientific learning, but will also take its place as the ultimate framework of the unity of human knowledge and action, leading them to converge towards a final goal and meaning. This *sapiential dimension* is all the more necessary today, because the immense expansion of humanity's technical capability demands a renewed and sharpened sense of ultimate values. If this technology is not ordered to something greater than a merely utilitarian end, then it could soon prove inhuman and even become potential destroyer of the human race. The word of God reveals the final destiny of men and women and provides a unifying explanation of all that they do in the world. This is why it invites philosophy to engage in the search for the natural foundation of this meaning, which corresponds to the religious impulse innate in every person. A philosophy denying the possibility of an ultimate and overarching meaning would be not only ill-adapted to its task, but false.⁷

This prompts a second requirement: that philosophy verify the human capacity to *know the truth*, to come to a knowledge which can reach objective truth by means of that *adaequatio et intellectus* to which the Scholastic Doctors referred. This requirement, proper to faith, was explicitly reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council: "Intelligence is not confined to observable data alone. It can with genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable, though in consequence of sin that certitude is partially obscured and weakened".⁸

The two requirements already stipulated imply a third: the need for a philosophy of *genuinely*

metaphysical range, capable, that is, of transcending empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate and foundational in its search for truth. This requirement is implicit in sapiential and analytical knowledge alike; and in particular it is a requirement for knowing the moral good, which has its ultimate foundation in the Supreme Good, God himself. Here I do not mean to speak of metaphysics in the sense of a specific school or a particular historical current of thought. I want only to state that reality and truth do transcend the factual and the empirical, and to vindicate the human being's capacity to know this transcendent and metaphysical dimension in a way that is true and certain, albeit imperfect and analogical. In this sense, metaphysics should not be seen as an alternative to anthropology, since it is metaphysics which makes it possible to ground the concept of personal dignity in virtue of their spiritual nature. In a special way, the person constitutes a privileged locus for the encounter with being, and hence with metaphysical enquiry.⁹

Blessed Pope John Paul II was very clear in the message he wanted to transmit when he introduced this encyclical to the world. In a very wise and systematic way, he has stated the relationship between faith and reason. He gives emphasis to the importance of metaphysics for understanding the faith. And, he magnificently states the Church's concern with today's demands for a true, authentic philosophy.

To conclude, Father Brian Mullady summarizes it in the best way in his lecture notes: "The key to the return to a proper relationship between faith and reason is the development of a realistic and objective metaphysics that each can share in their own discipline. Then common truths but different methods will be fully respected".

¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on Faith and Reason (September 14, 1998) #4 at the Holy See, www.vatican.va

² Mullady O.P., Fr. Brian. "Notes from Lecture 14: Philosophy for Theologians". (Cromwell, CT: Holy Apostles College & Seminary).

³ Mullady O.P., Fr. Brian. "Notes from Lecture 14: Philosophy for Theologians". (Cromwell, CT: Holy Apostles College & Seminary).

⁴ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on Faith and Reason (September 14, 1998) #5 at the Holy See, www.vatican.va

⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on Faith and Reason (September 14, 1998) #77 at the Holy See, www.vatican.va

⁶ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on Faith and Reason (September 14, 1998) #3 at the Holy See, www.vatican.va

⁷ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on Faith and Reason (September 14, 1998) #81 at the Holy See, www.vatican.va

⁸ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on Faith and Reason (September 14, 1998) #82 at the Holy See, www.vatican.va

⁹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on Faith and Reason (September 14, 1998) #83 at the Holy See, www.vatican.va

Back to Main Page of Teachings of SCTJM...



Return to main page
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