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The Mind's Ability to Recognize the Truth

In today's world, we are experiencing a crisis in the concept of truth. This context underlines the relevance of this theme in the Church's dialogue with today's person, who is searching for the meaning of life and objective truth.

John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* is one of the efforts to restore scientific weight to the question of truth. At the same time, the Pope calls not only to reveal the correct interaction between knowledge by faith and knowledge by reason, but also to actualize the importance of the relationship between philosophy and theology. The encyclical discusses the relationship between theology, philosophy and natural science, and critically examines various philosophical views that deny the possibility of knowing the truth. „And God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves (cf. *Ex* 33:18; *Ps* 27:8-9; 63:2-3; *Jn* 14:8; *1 Jn* 3:2)”¹.

Fides et Ratio, in strict harmony with the rethinking of the faith-reason relation as an implication of the necessary “reflection on truth” takes up the task of inquiry about the truth². Joseph Ratzinger, speaking about the relevance of the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* today, emphasizes that its purpose is to rehabilitate the question of truth in a relativistic world³.

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¹ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical on the Relationship Between Faith and Reason, Rome 1998, available online at: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html (accessed on Feb. 19, 2024).

² Cardinal Ratzinger, in his presentation of the encyclical, affirms: “The central question of *Fides et Ratio* is the question of truth. But this question is not just one among the many and various questions that man has to face. Rather, it is the fundamental and ineliminable question, the question that runs through all times and periods of human life and history”. “L'Osservatore Romano” 16 October 1998.

³ J. Ratzinger, *Foi, vérité, tolerance*, Paris 2005, p. 195.

The Church has made her pilgrim way along the paths of the world to proclaim that Jesus Christ is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (*Jn* 14:6). It is her duty to serve humanity in different ways, but one way in particular imposes a responsibility of a quite special kind: the diakonia of the truth. This mission on the one hand makes the believing community a partner in humanity’s shared struggle to arrive at truth; and on the other hand it obliges the believing community to proclaim the certitudes arrived at, albeit with a sense that every truth attained is but a step towards that fullness of truth which will appear with the final Revelation of God⁴.

Knowing the truth through thinking

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 tasks⁵.

Pope John Paul II emphasizes that philosophy should not lose sight of its fundamental vocation to seek the truth. A philosophy that no longer raises fundamental questions about the meaning of human life tends to reduce natural cognition to a purely instrumental function. In order to be in harmony with Revelation, philosophy must rediscover the dimension of wisdom. This requirement is essential if philosophy, which recognizes the possibility of the existence of an ultimate and unifying meaning, is not to be diverted from its main task⁶.

Joseph Ratzinger, says that Pope John Paul II’s encyclical does not favour any particular philosophical school of thought. On the contrary, he wishes to point out the “path of wisdom” which makes it possible to overcome the post-modern forms of thought which reject the question of truth⁷.

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. 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 thought⁸.

⁴ FR 2.

⁵ FR 3.

⁶ FR 81.

⁷ *Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger: Faith, Truth, and Culture. Reflections Prompted by the Encyclical Fides et Ratio*, available online at: <https://matiane.wordpress.com/2018/11/24/cardinal-joseph-ratzinger-faith-truth-and-culture/> (accessed on Feb. 19, 2024).

⁸ FR 3-4.

Speaking about the encyclical, Angelo Scola states that the encyclical uses St. Augustine's thoughts: "Believers are also thinkers: when they believe they think, and when they think they believe. If faith does not think, it is nothing"⁹.

Thinking is not an unrelated activity of the brain, it is closely related to the whole human life. Therefore, if we want thinking to bear the most mature fruits, especially when we are looking for metaphysical truths, it is necessary to foster the ethics of thinking, which seeks not only logical accuracy, but creates a spiritual climate for the activity of the mind, characterized by humility, sincerity, courage, honesty, trust, consideration for others, openness to the Mystery. This universal ethic of "thinking" does not discourage, but supports and facilitates research efforts. And when we are on the verge of the Mystery, it even gives us direction. For there is an inner connection between the "verum" and the "bonum": truth and goodness, which in God is in accord with His very essence¹⁰.

According to the Pope, people of culture and science have a greater responsibility than others to ensure that the path of reason is not obstructed, leading to mystery. This duty does not come from outside, as if it were a restraint on scientific inquiry and a restriction on freedom. In fact, it comes from a coherent logical mindset.

In thinking, a person feels his own limitations, realizes that he is not the truth. On the contrary, he has to search for it as if in a daze. At the same time, he finds that in his search for truth he cannot and will not be satisfied with the part of it he has discovered, nor with small crumbs, but is drawn ever more powerfully upwards, towards the infinite. This essential impetus is inherent in the mind's inveterate activity, which places man between his limited perception and his absolute desire. Therefore, when a man, deeply committed to accurate reason, "thinks" with an open heart, he is already on the path towards the encounter with God¹¹.

The harmony of faith and reason

M. Magee said: "The synthesis between faith and reason is the perennially valid achievement of the collective intellectual life of Catholics, i.e. the relationship between faith and reason is articulated nowhere more clearly and beautifully than in *Fides et Ratio*. The awareness that realities exist that cannot be accessed by reason alone does not stifle reason; on the contrary, it allows reason to be presented with fresh material that it can probe without ever reaching the end"¹².

⁹ A. Scola, *Human Freedom and Truth According to the Encyclical Fides et Ratio*, "Communio" 26(1999).

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II's address to the intelligentsia at Vilnius University, St. John's Church, 5 September 1993.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *The influence and impact of Fides et Ratio at 25*, available online at: <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2023/09/14/the-influence-and-impact-of-fides-et-ratio-at-25/> (accessed on Feb. 19, 2024).

Once reason successfully intuits and formulates the first universal principles of being and correctly draws from them conclusions which are coherent both logically and ethically, then it may be called right reason. The Church cannot but set great value upon reason's drive to attain goals which render people's lives ever more worthy. As the source of love, God desires to make himself known; and the knowledge which the human being has of God perfects all that the human mind can know of the meaning of life¹³.

To assist reason in its effort to understand the mystery there are the signs which Revelation itself presents. These serve to lead the search for truth to new depths, enabling the mind in its autonomous exploration to penetrate within the mystery by use of reason's own methods, of which it is rightly jealous. Yet these signs also urge reason to look beyond their status as signs in order to grasp the deeper meaning which they bear. They contain a hidden truth to which the mind is drawn and which it cannot ignore without destroying the very signs which it is given¹⁴.

The truth made known to us by Revelation is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason. This revealed truth is set within our history as an anticipation of that ultimate and definitive vision of God which is reserved for those who believe in him and seek him with a sincere heart¹⁵. The source of Christian truth, from the Church's point of view, is not its own deliberations, but Revelation¹⁶.

Intelligence enables everyone, believer and non-believer, to reach "the deep waters" of knowledge (cf. *Prov* 20:5). Here we are referring first and foremost to the "Christian philosophy" expressed by the principle: *Credo ut intelligam* (Augustine). Faith seeks the intellect, it enlightens the mind in order to know philosophically correctly and to reflect on itself by means of philosophy¹⁷.

What is distinctive in the biblical text is the conviction that there is a profound and indissoluble unity between the knowledge of reason and the knowledge of faith.

Faith intervenes not to abolish reason's autonomy nor to reduce its scope for action, but solely to bring the human being to understand that in these events it is the God of Israel who acts.

Faith sharpens the inner eye, opening the mind to discover in the flux of events the workings of Providence, there is thus no reason for competition of any kind between reason and faith: each contains the other, and each has its own scope for action. To men and women there falls the task of exploring truth

¹³ FR 4, 7.

¹⁴ FR 13.

¹⁵ FR 15.

¹⁶ *Paskelbta popiežiaus Jono Pauliaus II enciklika "Fides et ratio" ("Tikėjimas ir protas")*, *Bažnyčios žinios*. 1998 spalio 26, Nr. 20. *Bažnyčia pasaulyje* (baznycioszinios.lt).

¹⁷ A. Anzenbacher, *Einführung in die Philosophie*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2010.

with their reason, and in this their nobility consists. According to the Old Testament, then, faith liberates reason in so far as it allows reason to attain correctly what it seeks to know and to place it within the ultimate order of things, in which everything acquires true meaning¹⁸.

Bishop James Conley has said: “There can never be a contradiction between faith and reason. There might be things in science we can’t explain, but that’s simply because it goes beyond the realm of being able to be proven” and “because reality is a mystery. We don’t know everything about reality, and we never will, because we’re dealing with God, God’s creation, and God is infinite, and we’re never going to unravel all the mysteries of the universe”¹⁹.

The Second Vatican Council’s pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* highlights the progress made by man today in the empirical, technical and liberal sciences, but also reminds us that man is essentially a spiritual being. He is not only able to know various physical phenomena with his mind, but he is also able to reach the thoughtful realm. Man’s spiritual nature remains unchanged: in his will there is the inclination to love what is good, and in the power of reason there is the inclination to know the truth. What is more, man’s nature contains the desire to seek transcendent truth. True faith recognizes and values reason, and nurtures and encourages it, as Church teaching has repeatedly emphasized²⁰.

Pope John Paul II says that a faith that lacks reason emphasizes feeling and experience and is therefore in danger of ceasing to be a universal offer. It is an illusion to think that faith is better able to persuade in the face of a weak mind; on the contrary, it is in serious danger of becoming myth and superstition²¹.

According to Ratzinger, the question of truth is a fundamental question of the Christian faith. If I had to briefly describe the main intention of the encyclical, I would say: „the encyclical wants to rehabilitate the question of truth in a world marked by relativism; in the circumstances of today’s science—science that seeks truths, but rejects the question of truth as unscientific—to put it on the square again as a rational and scientific task, otherwise faith will start to run out of air. The encyclical simply wanted to encourage again to embark on the adventure of truth. Therefore, it crosses the boundaries of faith, but also includes the world of faith”²².

Patrick Lee has said, “The encyclical boldly and confidently explains how Catholic faith—far from competing with reason and science—encourages the use of reason and the pursuit of science. The encyclical teaches that all of us have a duty to seek the truth about the fundamental meaning of life and live in

¹⁸ FR 16, 20.

¹⁹ *The influence and impact of Fides et Ratio at 25*, op. cit.

²⁰ Vatikano II Susirinkimas, *Pastoralinė konstitucija apie Bažnyčių šiuolaikiniame pasaulyje „Gaudium et spes“*, 15.

²¹ *Paskelbta popiežiaus Jono Pauliaus II enciklika “Fides et ratio”*..., op. cit.

²² J. Ratzinger, *Tikejimas, tiesa ir kultūra – apmąstymai remiantis enciklika Fides et ratio*, available online at: <https://www.propatria.lt/2013/11/josephas-ratzingeris-tikejimas-tiesa-ir-12.html> (accessed on Feb. 19, 2024).

accord with the truth we find. The eternal does not negate the specific and personal goods in this life, grace does not supplant nature, and faith does not oppose reason. The encyclical makes an urgent call to Catholic intellectuals—philosophers, theologians, scientists, historians, and so on—to make their specific contributions to handing on God’s truth and love”²³.

It should be noted that Pope John Paul II did not see it as his task in the encyclical to take up the entirely practical question of whether and how the truth can become “scientific” again²⁴.

It is the nature of the human being to seek the truth. This search looks not only to the attainment of truths which are partial, empirical or scientific; nor is it only in individual acts of decision-making that people seek the true good. Their search looks towards an ulterior truth which would explain the meaning of life. And it is therefore a search which can reach its end only in reaching the absolute. Thanks to the inherent capacities of thought, man is able to encounter and recognize a truth of this kind. Such a truth—vital and necessary as it is for life—is attained not only by way of reason but also through trusting acquiescence to other persons who can guarantee the authenticity and certainty of the truth itself²⁵.

Access to the truth enables access to God, it must be denied to none. There are many paths which lead to truth, but since Christian truth has a salvific value, any one of these paths may be taken, as long as it leads to the final goal, that is to the Revelation of Jesus Christ²⁶.

The encyclical *Fides et Ratio* emphasizes man’s ability to continually search for the truth, not just any truth, but the truth that transcends him. It is in the metaphysical dimension that he discovers the fundamental truths of life²⁷.

The metaphysical analysis of being, while recognizing the operation of the fundamental principles of being in the human person, also raises the question of the first Being, which religious traditions call God. In the context of today’s crisis of truth, the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* calls for confidence in the power of the human mind to know God by natural reason²⁸. Only in the plane of existence, only on the basis of actual existence, can the mind rise to the first Being, the pure Act, and contemplate it, as far as the natural mind allows.

The Magisterium of the Church, while acknowledging the capacity of the natural mind to know God, reminds us that this knowledge is limited, and that our speech about Him is therefore limited. We speak of God on the basis of a poor human knowledge. Our human language will never fully express His mystery. St. Thomas Aquinas perfectly describes the specifics of the natural

²³ *The influence and impact of Fides et Ratio at 25*, op. cit.

²⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Tikėjimas, tiesa ir kultūra...*, op. cit.

²⁵ FR 33.

²⁶ FR 38.

²⁷ FR 5, 83.

²⁸ FR 56.

knowledge of God: „we are not able to perceive what God is like, but only what he is not like and how others relate to him”²⁹.

Conclusion

The encyclical *Fides et Ratio* calls for a quest for knowledge that confirms the mind's capacity to know objective truth and, above all, the ultimate Truth, God. The interaction between the truth of being and the truth of knowledge is the foundation of objective truth. John Paul II stresses that the right relationship between faith and reason requires both a mature faith and a strong reason. The pursuit of truth is written in the nature of both human reason and faith. God Himself is the author of both orders of knowledge, so that although faith and reason differ in their object and foundation, they are not in conflict with each other.

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Summary

Drawing on John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, this article is about the mind's capacity to know the truth. God Himself has implanted in the heart of man the desire to know the truth, the ultimate goal of which is to know Himself, so that man, in knowing and loving God, may attain to the full truth about himself. In order to reflect the essence of the relationship with faith and reason, this paper deals with the knowledge of truth through thinking and the harmony between faith and reason.

Keywords: mind, truth, faith, John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*.

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²⁹ *Katalikų Bažnyčios Katekizmas*, Vilnius 2012, 39-43; cf. M. Sieńkowski, *Wissen und Glaube in Bezug auf die Wahrheit nach dem hl. Thomas von Aquin*, „Studia Elckie” 14(2012), s. 156-157.

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