

Faith & Reason

'Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth...'

With these words John Paul II begins his thirteenth encyclical, *Faith and Reason (Fides et Ratio)*, which was released in October 1998.

Addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church, *Fides et Ratio* addresses the relationship between faith and reason, between theology and philosophy, how belief in God relates to the human quest for truth.

In writing this document the Pope acknowledges the immense impact philosophical thought has on human behaviour and the value of philosophy for the understanding of faith.

But philosophy is not always done well. The Pope wishes also to point out the limits philosophy faces when it neglects or rejects the truths which have been revealed by God.

***Faith and Reason* comprises seven chapters. Key points from each chapter are briefly summarized in this issue of Landmarks.**

Introduction

Who am I?

Where have I come from?

Why is there evil?

What is there after this life?

Questions like these are fundamental to the human search for meaning and have arisen again and again throughout human history. The importance of such questions and the way we approach them is the concern of John Paul II in *Faith and Reason*. The answers people give to these questions will decide the direction they give to their lives. (n.1)

The encyclical challenges a certain trend in modern philosophy—a tendency to abandon the quest for fullness of truth, settling instead for partial and makeshift truths.

This has led to the widespread idea that all viewpoints about human existence are equally valid, a position John Paul II describes as symptomatic of a 'lack of confidence in truth' (n.5).

Chapter 1 of *Faith and Reason* discusses a twofold order of knowledge. There are things which we can know through natural reason and there are mysteries which can only be known through divine revelation. These two kinds of knowledge are not identical; nor are they mutually exclusive. (n.9)

Underlying all the Church's thinking is the awareness of a unique encounter between humanity and God. In that encounter a wisdom beyond all human

knowing was communicated. In Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit, the love of the Father was revealed in such a way as to draw us into a new life; a life of knowing God who is love and knowing ourselves as created in love with a destiny to share in the divine relationship forever. (n.11)

Through human reason elements of this mystery, of this ultimate meaning of life, can be grasped in a limited way. Only through faith can the mystery be known with certainty and come to completion in our lives. (n.13)

Testimony:

Thinking things through

I was listening to a personal development program on tape. The presenter, a dynamic and internationally acclaimed speaker, was full of techniques for improving one's lifestyle: how to set goals, how to get more out of relationships, how to increase your wealth and so on. Many of the techniques were excellent and the speaker had outstanding communication skills. I was impressed... to a point. Yet I sensed something missing. In discussing my misgivings with a friend it became clearer to me that the speaker's underlying assumptions did not completely align with my Christian beliefs. For him, life has value and meaning only in so far as a person assigns it a value or meaning. For me, my life's meaning is more than just a decision I make; my happiness is more than the emotional state I have created. Whatever happens, I know I am loved by God, my Creator, the source of all life. (Anna)

The unending Journey

Chapter 2 explores the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Here we see how deeply connected are the knowledge conferred by faith and the knowledge conferred by wisdom. The wise person is one who loves and seeks the truth. The intellect's quest for truth is a journey set within the larger horizon of faith. To be authentic the journey must be:

1. Ongoing
2. Humble
3. Respectful of the transcendent

To ignore these 'rules' is to run the risk of foolishness. We can wind up thinking we have all the answers and confuse a clever ego with true and lasting wisdom. This is the predicament described in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. The symbolism of 'the tree of knowledge of good and evil' (Gen 2:17) tells us that humanity lost sight of the fact that its powers are dependent on a greater mystery that is the source of all knowledge. Christ is the one who frees humanity from this primal disobedience. (n.22)

The quest for truth is rarely a straight path. Our natural limitations and struggles obscure the search. For some people, truth drowns in a sea of other concerns. Still others run from the truth as soon as they glimpse it, afraid of its demands. Yet no matter how we might evade it or ignore it, truth remains truth and continues to influence our lives. (n.28)

The search for truth may be difficult but it is never in vain. In grappling with the fundamental questions of life there is at least an outline of an answer in the soul of each person. The human desire to grow in certainty calls us to keep exploring and testing these embryonic answers as we seek the fullness of truth. (n.29)

Chapter 3 acknowledges that 'in the far reaches of the human heart there is a seed of desire and nostalgia for God' (n.24). The desire to know the truth is deeply embedded in human nature. As St Augustine said: 'I have met many who wanted to deceive but none who wanted to be deceived' (see n.25).

Through the arts, sciences and philosophies of each age, people have articulated the desire to know what is true. The pursuit of truth requires the person to move beyond mere opinions to know how things really are; to move from a preoccupation with self to a wisdom beyond oneself. 'Whether we admit it or not, there comes for everyone the moment when personal existence must be anchored to a truth recognized as final, a truth which confers a certitude no longer open to doubt' (n.27). In coming to this truth, at some point we must take a step in faith; we must *believe*.

The wisdom of the Cross

In Jesus' horrific death we see faith extending the possibilities for human reason. Reason asks what possible logic there can be in this apparently gross action of human failure and suffering. And yet it is precisely in the Cross that the unfathomable depths of God's love shine forth. 'What a challenge this is to our reason, and how great the gain for reason if it yields to this wisdom!' (n.23)

The Cross is the reef upon which the link between faith and reason can break up, but also the reef beyond which the two can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth.

Testimony:

Witness to the truth

Franz Jaegerstaetter was an Austrian farmer in his thirties who chose to accept death rather than take the oath of loyalty to Hitler which was demanded of him during the German occupation of his homeland. During his time in prison, a number of people—including his wife and his parish priest—tried to persuade Franz to relax his position of total opposition to the Nazi war machine in order to save his life. Franz loved his wife and three children dearly and had no desire to be separated from them, yet such was his commitment to the truth that he refused to cooperate in any shape or form with the evil of Nazism. He simply would not play what he called 'the crooked game'. Franz was executed on August 9, 1943.

In search of **truth**

Chapter 4 surveys the development of philosophical thought in the history of the Church. From the ancients to the patristic era to medieval times, Christianity developed a relationship with the philosophical currents of the day which was both welcoming and cautious. The great Christian thinkers were not afraid to acknowledge those elements that converged with revelation while clearly identifying the points of divergence.

The encyclical particularly affirms the contribution of St Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas' genius was to demonstrate the harmony between faith and reason, bringing about 'a reconciliation between the secularity of the world and radicality of the Gospel' (n.43).

In subsequent ages an unfortunate separation developed between philosophy and theology. Among some philosophers there developed a tendency to abandon the search for absolute truth, settling instead for a subjective certainty or a pragmatic sense of utility. In some quarters of the Church grew a deep mistrust of reason and a tendency to deny the rational dimension of faith. Against this historical backdrop John Paul II calls for a reappraisal of the relationship

between faith and reason. Faith tied to weak reasoning is not convincing. Reason unrelated to faith is superficial. In the search for truth one cannot be fruitful without the other.

Chapter 5 explains the interventions of the magisterium of the Church in philosophical matters. While the Church does not canonize any particular philosophy in preference to others, the magisterium does exercise a critical discernment of opinions and philosophies that contradict Christian doctrine. (n.50) These interventions are not intended to dampen independent thought but to prompt, promote and encourage philosophical enquiry. (n.51)

Such discernment is especially pertinent in these times when there is a plurality of opinions on offer. The Church recognizes the legitimate autonomy (as distinct from self-sufficiency) of philosophy. In its search for truth reason must be accountable to its own principles. The Church also recognizes that, as bearer and discernor of divine revelation, the Church has its own field of expertise to which it must be faithful. Faith and reason must each engage and respect the other.

Truth and culture

The encyclical discusses issues of inculturation. The truth which is sought by both faith and reason is bigger and more fundamental than any one human culture or epoch of history. While recognizing that every cultural expression which is an authentic manifestation of the truth finds a home in the gospel message, we must remember that the search for truth cannot be limited by the customs and thought patterns of any particular culture. (n.70-72)

Testimony:

Vision of faith

Faith is like a pair of sunglasses at the beach or on the snowfields. Without them you have to squint into the distance. But put on the sunglasses and you can see clearly and easily. The scenery is the same, but you are looking at it very differently. (Lisa)

It is impossible to assess personally every bit of knowledge acquired by generations of human existence. To a great extent life involves entrusting ourselves to the knowledge acquired by other people. Thus there is a critical relational dimension to the quest for truth and to the process by which we come to believe. (n.32)

Personal growth involves more than the acquisition of abstract concepts; it involves a dynamic relationship of self-giving with others. By entrusting ourselves to others we come to a recognition of truth embodied in the lives of people. Consider the witness of the martyrs. We feel our hearts stirred and convinced because, in their commitment to truth, we see what we already know at some deep level; we hear declared that which we long to express.

Awaken the **passion** for truth

Chapter 6 deals with the interaction between philosophy and theology. Theology is structured in the light of two principles: *auditus fidei* (hearing of faith) and *intellectus fidei* (understanding of faith). With the first, theology is concerned with grasping the gospel message as expounded in the Church's scriptures, tradition and teaching office. With the second, theology focuses on the intelligibility of the message according to the demands of rigorous thought. Philosophy contributes to both these tasks. In turn, the insights of theology enrich the process of philosophical enquiry, expanding its horizons and taking it to places it would never have gone by itself.

Chapter 7 calls philosophers to address the modern 'crisis of meaning'. The fragmentation of knowledge and the vast array of theories which claim to offer answers have led many people to be skeptical and indifferent towards the search for truth. They wonder if anything can make sense and opt to abandon the search for life's ultimate meaning.

We must reawaken the passion for truth, says John Paul II. He is insistent that philosophy must include metaphysics. 'Here I do not mean to speak of metaphysics in the sense of a specific school... I want only to state that reality and truth do transcend the factual and empirical' (n.83). To be a seeker of truth one must look beyond material realities, beyond the study of the human being, to the transcendent, the absolute, the spiritual.

Here *Faith and Reason* warns against certain modern tendencies. Described simply, they are:

Eclecticism

One picks and chooses from different philosophies without concern for their internal coherence. (n.86)

Historicism

There is no enduring truth. What is true in a past age is entirely relative to what's true today. (n.87)

Scientism

Only scientific knowledge has value. Religious, theological, ethical and aesthetic knowledge are mere fantasy. If something is technically possible it is morally admissible. (n.88)

Pragmatism

If an option is expedient and most people seem to want it, then it's a valid choice. (n.89)

Nihilism

There is no such thing as the certainty of ultimate truth. Everything in the world is provisional and ephemeral. (n.90)

In view of these and other contemporary challenges, theologians today face a dual task.

1. They must continually renew their methods and perspectives so as to meet the demands of each new social, cultural and historical context.
2. At the same time, theology must never lose sight of the object of its enquiry: the living God revealed in Jesus, the Word made flesh.

Conclusion

John Paul II concludes with an appeal to philosophers, theologians, scientists and all people to look more deeply at the human person, whose true identity is found in the mystery of Christ's love, 'and at the human being's unceasing search for truth and meaning' (n.107).

Different philosophies have lured people into believing that they are the absolute master of their own destiny, trusting only their own powers. This is false, for the greatness and freedom of the human being 'can find fulfillment only in choosing to enter the truth, to make a home under the shade of Wisdom and dwell there' (n.107)

Mary, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.

Testimony:

Leap of faith

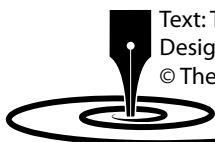
I watch my child hesitatingly taking his first steps.

He is oblivious to the miracle that is taking place, the complex interplay of his motor skills and balance. He simply gurgles with pleasure as he reaches unsteadily for my outstretched hands.

If only I was eager to step out into the unknown. Why am I so full of doubts? Like my child, perhaps I need to revel more in the delight of God's outstretched hands rather than dwell upon the complexities of reaching him. (Sarah)

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Landmarks

A publication for parishes and schools, Landmarks presents key points from Church documents in reader-friendly formats.

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