

Faith and Reason: John Paul and Aquinas

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POPE JOHN PAUL II wove together, within his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, a number of multifaceted and interconnected themes bearing upon the relationship between faith and reason. While the pope was aware of many examples of men and women within the history of philosophy and theology who have knitted faith and reason together in a proper and fruitful manner, he nonetheless singled out Thomas Aquinas as the chief exemplar. For the pope, “Thomas had the great merit of giving pride of place to the harmony which exists between faith and reason” (§43, see also §57). In this essay I want, firstly, to examine the various themes interlocking faith and reason and in so doing pointing out the Thomistic spirit that pervades their relationship. Secondly, I want briefly to provide, from within a biblical and Thomistic setting, a metaphysical and epistemological basis for the pope’s teaching.

By way of introduction it must be noted that the pope was actually more concerned with reason than with faith. His concern was twofold. Firstly, within the contemporary climate of philosophical relativism, agnosticism, and even nihilism, he believed that human beings, most especially philosophers, must renew their confidence in reason’s ability to come to know the truth, specifically metaphysical truth, for it is only in reason’s ability to grasp the truth that men and women obtain their true human dignity (see §4–5, 45–49, 55).

Life in fact can never be grounded upon doubt, uncertainty or deceit; such an existence would be threatened constantly by fear and anxiety. One may define the human being, therefore, as *the one who seeks the truth* (§28).

Thus, the Church “sees in philosophy the way to come to know fundamental truths about human life” (§5).

Secondly, this renewed confidence is essential not only for allowing reason to function properly within its own human intellectual sphere, but also for allowing it to function properly in relationship to faith. Reason can facilitate faith, and, most especially, advance a fuller understanding of the mysteries of faith so as to provide for their clearer articulation, and so concurrent defence. Ultimately, for the pope, it was only when reason interacts with faith, that is, with the revelation of God fully manifested in Jesus Christ, that it achieves its highest goal, that of coming to know, in a communion of love, the mystery of the triune God.

John Paul accentuates this twofold concern when he states:

This is why I make this strong and insistent appeal—not, I trust untimely—that faith and philosophy recover the profound unity which allows them to stand in harmony with their nature without compromising their mutual autonomy. The *parrhesia* [outspokenness] of faith must be matched by the boldness of reason (§48, see also 56).

How then did John Paul perceive this interaction between reason and faith?

Faith—The Friend of Reason

While the pope insisted that the human intellect possesses its own natural or innate ability to come to a knowledge of the truth, faith, in the aftermath of sin, now comes to reason’s aid. Faith in the Gospel, containing as it does the Spirit of truth, heals reason of its weaknesses so that it might now freely undertake its natural pursuit of the truth in a more vigorous manner. Moreover, faith opens up to reason new avenues of intellectual enquiry, which, when left to itself, it would never have considered exploring. Thus, for John Paul, revelation is “the true lodestar of men and women as they strive to make their way amid the pressures of an immanentist habit of mind and the constrictions of a technocratic logic” (§15). Faith “sharpens the inner eye, opening the mind to discover in the flux of events the working of Providence” (§16). Even within the context of the Old Testament one finds that

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 meaning. In brief, human beings attain truth by way of reason because, enlightened by faith, they discover the deeper meaning of all things and most especially of their own existence (§20).

The basis of the pope's claim is the Thomistic principle that as grace builds upon nature, "so faith builds upon and perfects reason. Illumined by faith, reason is set free from the fragility and limitations deriving from the disobedience of sin and finds the strength required to rise to the knowledge of the Triune God" (§43). John Paul insists that "it is faith which stirs reason to move beyond all isolation and willingly to run risks so that it may attain whatever is beautiful, good and true. Faith thus becomes the convinced and convincing advocate of reason" (§56, see also 75). Faith, therefore, as a theological virtue, "purifies reason" thus allowing it truly to act in a fully rational manner (§76). Moreover, divine revelation has forced philosophy to view "new vistas of further meanings which reason is summoned to penetrate" and thus revelation has been "an undoubted boon for philosophy" (§101). Throughout the encyclical, then, John Paul encourages and exhorts contemporary men and women not to undermine their intellectual dignity by assuming that truth is beyond their reach. Rather, they are called to acknowledge in truth that they are able, as intellectual human beings, actually to know the truth. Faith, far from being its enemy, is ultimately reason's best friend.

While on one level the encyclical ardently endorses reason's natural ability to know the truth and so encourages contemporary men and women to have confidence in reason's ability, yet the pope never, on another level, in accordance with Aquinas's principle, allows reason an autonomy that would divorce it from grace, that is, from the sphere of faith (see §45–58). In the light of sin, reason is now dependent upon faith in order for it to function properly and so reach its full potential. There is then, throughout the encyclical, a subtle but unmistakable call to conversion, for faith is reason's salvation.

Reason—The Friend of Faith

Reason as the Window to Faith

While faith befriends reason so too, for John Paul, was reason called upon to befriend faith. In accordance with Aquinas, the pope recognized that "faith . . . has no fear of reason, but seeks it out and has trust in it" (§43). This befriending, as seen above, must be predicated upon a robust confidence in reason's ability. Only when reason is allowed to exercise its full philosophical maturity, and so be truly rational, can it assume its noble task of befriending faith. Thus, the foundational expression of friendship is by reason recognizing and utilizing its natural ability to obtain metaphysical truth. For the pope, metaphysical knowledge bore witness to reason's dignity. Human reason is not confined to sensory knowledge, but

rather, through the means of the senses, the human intellect is able to discern the being and nature of things, and so obtain metaphysical knowledge (see §22). Philosophy is called upon “to verify the human capacity to *know the truth*, to come to a knowledge which can reach objective truth by means of that *adaequatio rei et intellectus* to which the Scholastic Doctors referred” (§82). Moreover, philosophy must then be “*genuinely metaphysical*” in that it allows men and women to obtain “the metaphysical dimension of reality”: “in truth, in beauty, in moral values, in other persons, in being itself, in God” (§83).

While John Paul did not make any explicit reference to a particular epistemology, yet it is evident that he here endorsed a realist position, one that would be in accordance with Aquinas’s own epistemology. Only such a realist epistemology, as will shortly become evident, allows reason to befriend faith, for only a realist position espouses reason’s ability obtain metaphysical truth about the ontological nature of reality, and so opens the window to faith. The pope, as was Aquinas, was well aware that an idealist, empiricist, relativist, rationalist, or fideist epistemology would not only not serve the interests of faith, but it would also more radically undercut its claim to truth (see §49–56, 86–91).

Philosophy, then, in authenticating reason’s ability to obtain metaphysical truth, does more than merely acknowledge that it can actually know the world around it, but such an epistemological affirmation also perceives that human reason is open to truth that exceeds its natural ability to obtain, that is, the revelation that comes from God. When reason confirms its own ability to know metaphysical truth, it equally endorses its ability to receive revelation, and in so doing befriends faith. As John Paul states:

At the deepest level, the autonomy which philosophy enjoys is rooted in the fact that reason is by its nature oriented to truth and is equipped moreover with the means necessary to arrive at truth. A philosophy conscious of this as its “constitutive status” cannot but respect the demands and the data of revealed truth (§49).

However, here resides the inadequacy of much contemporary philosophy, an inadequacy that finds its ancestry in the Enlightenment. Human beings lost faith in reason when they lost faith in revelation (see §45). Actually, philosophy lost its faith in reason precisely to avoid the demands of revelation and so avoid the summons to faith. By undermining reason’s ability to know the truth, it then became “reasonable” not to believe, and it was this sanctioning of unbelief that philosophy, very often, most desperately wanted to ensure. However, in reason’s attempt to shut the window on faith, it has also shut the window on its own dignity of being

truly rational (see §75–76). It is only when men and women become open to revelation and to the faith that it demands will they once more be willing to restore to reason its true nobility. Thus, again, at the heart of the encyclical resides a call to conversion, for only such a conversion can counteract contemporary philosophy's disparagement of reason.

Moreover, as the pope insists, it is only metaphysics that allows the content of revelation to be adequately understood and expressed. "A philosophy which shuns metaphysics would be radically unsuited to the task of mediation in the understanding of Revelation" (§83). Besides providing the opening to revelation, how then does metaphysics befriend faith? Moreover, in what ways does metaphysics aid in the understanding and the expression of faith? The answer to these questions is twofold.

The Guide to Faith

Firstly, metaphysical reasoning ensures and sanctions that the act of faith is not irrational. While the act of faith is distinct in itself, reason can guide the mind to faith. Again, it is here that the pope and Aquinas speak with one voice. Reason, through metaphysics, is able to come to "a natural knowledge of God." It is able to distinguish between divine revelation and other phenomena, and so it is able to discern its credibility. In that metaphysics treats of truths that are ontological in nature, it bears witness to the intellect's ability to know and articulate truth that is beyond the merely observable and phenomenal, and so equally testifies to the intellect's ability to grasp God's action manifested in historical deeds and interpreted in human words (see §10).

From all these truths, the mind is led to acknowledge the existence of a truly propaedeutic path to faith, one which can lead to the acceptance of Revelation without in any way compromising the principles and autonomy of the mind itself (§67).

John Paul affirms that, for human beings, the act of faith is the most "important act in their lives" for it is here that "freedom reaches the certainty of truth and chooses to live in that truth" (§13, see 75).

Enhancing the Mysteries

Secondly, reason is a servant of faith in that it enables the mysteries of revelation to be properly conceived and articulated so as to enhance their nobility and clarity, which, in turn, fosters the "communicating of the truth of the Gospel to those who do not know it" (§5). On the one hand revelation "is utterly gratuitous, moving from God to men and women

in order to bring them to salvation" (§7), so "there exists a knowledge which is peculiar to faith, surpassing the knowledge proper to human reason" (§8). Thus, "the truth made known to us by Revelation is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason" (§15). Reason, therefore, cannot "pass judgement on the contents of faith, of which it would be incapable since this is not its function" (§42). Nor then, can revelation be reduced to or subsumed within some human philosophy contrived by reason alone (such as is found, for example, in Kant, Hegel, or contemporary Process thought), which in turn would radically alter the understanding and interpretation of the mysteries of faith (see §46). Yet, on the other hand, reason's supreme dignity is found precisely in its ability to grasp the truths of faith and so seek to understand them. Faith actually "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" (§42).

It is at this juncture that John Paul's important treatment of the relationship between the *auditus fidei* and the *intellectus fidei*, with regards to the doing of theology, comes into prominence. Firstly, "theology makes its own the content of Revelation as this has been gradually expounded in Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Church's Magisterium" (§65). This is in keeping with the nature of revelation itself. God, through historical deeds and the human words that interprets those deeds, establishes the mystery of human salvation (see §10). This is what is to be believed in faith as it has been proclaimed and understood by the apostolic Church through the centuries. Human beings "acknowledge fully and integrally the truth of what is revealed because it is God himself who is the guarantor of that truth. They can make no claim upon this truth which comes to them as gift . . ." (§13). Secondly, following the ancient maxim, *fides quaerens intellectum*, it is precisely these same truths of faith that impel the rational believer, through the indwelling of the Spirit of truth, to seek a deeper understanding. Here the *intellectus fidei*, that is, reason animated by faith, strives to understand more deeply the truths of faith (see §79). The encyclical provides such examples as the use of language when speaking about God, the relations within the Trinity and the relationship between the divinity and the humanity in Christ (see §66). Reason can never fully comprehend the mysteries of faith and so make them fully intelligible, yet reason can further clarify more precisely what the mysteries of faith are and in so doing make them even more illustrious and awe-inspiring.

There is here, then, a circular hermeneutic. First, through the act of faith reason receives the mysteries of faith and so grasps their truth.

Second, faith beckons reason to assist it in furthering its understanding of these mysteries. Third, reason performs this task, not apart from faith, but only under faith's guidance, for only faith itself can guide reason to a deeper understanding of faith's content. John Paul holds that, in the pursuit of a fuller understanding of God's word, it is through that very divine word that "reason is offered guidance and is warned against paths which would lead it to stray from revealed Truth" (§73). Were reason to perform its task apart from faith it would naturally tend to distort the mysteries by subsuming them within some rational philosophy that would evacuate them of their divine content. As the pope again states: "The knowledge of faith does not destroy the mystery, it only reveals it the more, showing how necessary it is for people's lives" (§13).

It is evident that the spirit and thought of Aquinas is contained within the pope's understanding of how reason relates to faith's desire to fathom the divine mysteries. It is almost as if one can hear the voice of Aquinas echoing in the pope's very words. For example, in the doing of theology Aquinas takes as his starting point *sacra doctrina*, that is, the teaching of sacred Scripture, which "has no science above itself,"¹ along with the Church's doctrinal tradition and magisterial pronouncements concerning its interpretation.² This is what is to be accepted in faith. Neither reason nor philosophy gives rise to *sacra doctrina*. In the very first question of his *Summa theologiae* Aquinas states:

Whereas man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that, besides philosophical science built up by reason there should be a sacred science learned through revelation.³

Likewise, the truth of *sacra doctrina* is guaranteed not by reasoned argument, but "its certitude [is] from the light of the divine knowledge, which cannot be misled."⁴ In accordance with the encyclical, Aquinas insists then that *sacra doctrina* "does not argue in proof of its principles, which are the articles of faith"⁵ for "it accepts its principles not from other sciences; but immediately from God, by revelation."⁶ Nonetheless, while

¹ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 8.

² *ST* I, q. 1, a. 83; I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

³ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 1.

⁴ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 5.

⁵ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 8.

⁶ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 5; I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 1 and 2.

divine revelation must be accepted in faith, yet, in keeping with the pope's teaching, it seeks philosophy's aid in order to obtain a fuller and deeper understanding. For Aquinas, as for the pope, philosophy is the essential "handmaiden" of *sacra doctrina* "for this science can in a sense depend upon the philosophical sciences, not as though it stood in need of them, but only in order to make its teaching clearer."⁷

[Similarly,] sacred doctrine makes use even of human reason, not, indeed, to prove faith (for thereby the merit of faith would come to an end), but to make clear other things that are put forward in this doctrine. Since therefore grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity.⁸

While Aquinas is not constantly singled out within the encyclical, his teaching on the relationship between faith and reason and the proper use of philosophy within that relationship is not merely hidden beneath the surface but actually embedded within the pope's own principles and teaching. This should not be surprising since, as was acknowledged at the onset, John Paul himself believed that Aquinas gave "pride of place to the harmony which exists between faith and reason" (§43). Thus Aquinas, would in turn, agree with John Paul that "faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth," which ultimately resides in the knowledge of and in the communion with the triune God (Introduction).

Faith and Reason: Man in the Image of God

Having examined John Paul's understanding of the multifaceted relationship between faith and reason accentuating its Thomistic heart, I would like now to address the question of what sort of anthropology is necessary for ensuring and sanctioning such a relationship. It is here that I perceive a weakness, maybe even a serious one, within the encyclical. While the pope rightly articulated many necessary points concerning faith and reason and their intricate relatedness, he does not propose an anthropology, with its confirming metaphysical and epistemology constituents, that is needed to support such an understanding. This may due to his belief that it is not his duty to articulate such a philosophical and theological program. As the pope himself notes: "It is my task to state principles and criteria which in my judgement are necessary in order to restore a harmonious and creative relationship between theology and philosophy" (§62).

⁷ ST I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

⁸ ST I, q. 1, a. 8.

Nonetheless, I believe that John Paul made a tactical error at the onset of his encyclical. He began by appraising the human search, both within the east and the west, for truth and meaning (see §1). I am sure he did this so as to begin from the point of human reason itself and not from some preconceived position of faith. Moreover, those without faith might also enter more easily into the discussion by first taking up the issues from within this very basic and universal human experience. However, having begun at the level of the universal human experience of searching for truth, John Paul never arrived at the point of fully providing a philosophical or theological basis for this human desire to know the truth or for the human ability actually to attain the truth.

While Plato and Aristotle, within their differing epistemological theories, may have argued that human beings could come to the truth, yet they too never asked the question of why such is the case. Within their respective anthropologies they highlighted the difference between man and what they considered the Ultimate: Plato, the immutable transcendental forms; Aristotle, the self enclosed pure Self-Thinking Thought. God, and not philosophers, would have to tell man why he is able to know the truth. Man, left to himself, could never tell himself why he is able to obtain knowledge. The answer lies not in the difference between God and man, but in their mutual likeness. "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Genesis 1:26). (It is astonishing that there are only two allusions to this passage within the whole of the pope's encyclical [see §80 and 90].) Human beings possess the nobility of being able to come to the truth because human beings possess the nobility of being created in the image and likeness of God. It is here that faith has primarily befriended reason for faith has revealed to man why he is indeed rational, capable of knowing the truth. But, then, this says something too about God in himself as Creator of the world and human beings.

On the first day of creation God established the science of metaphysics for, in bringing beings into existence, he founded the science of being, the science of that which is. Moreover, by giving existence to that which did not exist, God revealed that he is the fullness of being. God, then, within the completeness of his ontological nature as the fullness of being, embraces the full science of metaphysics. On the sixth day of creation God established the science of epistemology for in making man in his image and likeness he created a being that possessed the ability to know what is. There now exists a symmetry between God and man founded upon man being created in God's likeness. God in himself embraces both the fullness of being and thus the fullness of the science of metaphysics, and, equally, in knowing the fullness of the ontological reality that he is, he embraces the fullness of the

science of epistemology. Man, created in his image and likeness, thus, like God, embraces, in a created and human manner, both the science of metaphysics and the science of epistemology in that he, like God, is able *to know that which is*. This, it seems to me, is the authentic foundation both for the integrity of reason with its ability to obtain metaphysical knowledge and the integrity of faith with its ability to receive and know the revelation of God. Moreover, such an understanding establishes their mutually complementary befriending interrelationship, for reason is not only open to revelation, but it is also able to befriend faith in searching the metaphysical depths of what is revealed and so received in and guided by faith (see §97).

The above also founds and accentuates John Paul's theme of the need for conversion. Sin has blemished and distorted the image of God within man, thus imperilling his ability to know the truth. It is now only through faith in Christ, with its concurrent reception of the Holy Spirit of truth, that human beings are once more re-created in God's image and likeness and so able once more confidently to assume their full stature as rational beings. This now becomes faith's supreme act of charity bestowed upon reason.

Faith and Reason: Man in the Image of the Trinity

The depth of man's being created in God's image and likeness is only reached when placed within a Trinitarian context. While space does not allow a full treatment, I would like to note a few salient features taken from Aquinas. For Aquinas, man, as the image of God, is not simply seen within God's oneness, but rather, following Augustine, specifically and authentically within God being a trinity of persons.

Likewise, as the uncreated Trinity is distinguished by the procession of the Word from the Speaker, and of Love from both of these . . . ; so we may say that in rational creatures wherein we find a procession of the word in the intellect, and a procession of the love in the will, there exists an image of the uncreated Trinity.⁹

There are two points here that strengthen and deepen what was said above. First, the fact that man's intellect bears the likeness of the Word's procession from the Father accentuates the intellect's ability to know the truth, and specifically metaphysical truth. As the Word embodies and knows the whole of the Trinity's metaphysical reality, so man's intellect, which bears the Word's likeness, is equally able, in a human manner, to attain to the truth of being. Again, the pope could have theologically more firmly grounded man's ability to know the truth had he noted that

⁹ *ST I*, q. 93, a. 6.

man's intellect, bearing the image of God, assumes a similarity to the Father's Word in that the nature of both resides in their ability to embrace, in their own distinctive manner, the truth.

Second, as the Spirit proceeds as the love of the Father and Son, so human love proceeds from the will as a love for what is true. Here, I think we find another lacunae in the pope's encyclical. While great emphasis is placed on reason's ability to know the truth, there is little said of the will's predisposition to love the truth. Bringing this theme into play would have allowed the pope to address what might be at the heart of the contemporary disparagement of reason. Contemporary men and women often possess no love for the truth for fear of what truth will demand. This again, though, underscores John Paul's call for conversion for only faith will enkindle the will's loving desire to know the truth.

Third, Aquinas recognized that being in the Trinity's image and likeness is threefold in nature.

First, inasmuch as man possesses a natural aptitude for understanding and loving God; and this aptitude consists in the very nature of the mind, which is common to all men. Secondly, inasmuch as man actually or habitually knows and loves God, though imperfectly; and this image consists in the conformity of grace. Thirdly, inasmuch as man knows and loves God perfectly; and this image consists in the likeness of glory.¹⁰

Aquinas's first two ways in which human beings are created in the image of God are similar to what I articulated above, though now placed within a more Trinitarian context. The last is in keeping with John Paul's own emphasis, and it will be on this point that I will conclude this essay.

For John Paul the culmination of faith and reason's desire for the truth lies in the contemplation of the Trinity (see §13 and 93). Here the relationship between faith and reason most fully befriend one another and so are most fully united, for here faith places before reason what reason most fully desires and loves—the fullness of Truth itself. This finds its completion in the beatific vision, where human beings reside in the everlasting communion of knowledge and love with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As John Paul states:

The ultimate purpose of personal existence, then, is the theme of philosophy and theology alike. For all their difference of method and content, both disciplines point to that "path of life" (Ps. 16:11) which, as faith tells us, leads in the end to the full and lasting joy of the contemplation of the Triune God (§14).

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¹⁰ *ST* I, q. 93, a. 4.

