

Pope John Paul II's new encyclical

Faith and Reason: the two wings lifting the human soul toward consideration of truth. By Elisabeth Hellenbroich.

In the context of the celebration of his 20 years as Pope, John Paul II has issued an encyclical entitled *Fides et ratio* ("Faith and Reason"). Building off the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, which Leo XIII wrote 100 years ago, John Paul II, in the face of the urgent challenges which lie before mankind at the beginning of the third millennium, wants with this encyclical to "present the foundations and points of reference which I consider necessary in order to be able to again construct a harmonious and effective connection between philosophy and theology."

"Faith and reason," he says in the introduction, "are like the two wings, with which the human soul raises itself to consideration of the truth." Out of the radical traditionalism of a growing faith which the "mistrust of reason" brings you to, comes the danger of becoming fundamentalist. The same thing goes for the diverse modern philosophical currents of today, which, while they deny any metaphysical bond, make the truth into product of popularity and chance, and thus open the door to agnosticism, eclecticism, skepticism, relativism, positivism, and nihilism.

Common to all these directions of thinking, the Pope says, is the denial of "universal truth": While eclecticism refuses to consider ideas in a systematic and historical connection, historicism denies the eternal validity of universal truths. "Whatever was true in one epoch, the historicist maintains, doesn't need to be considered any more in another era."

Likewise, the Pope criticizes scientism, a current of thought which demands research "free" of religious, theological, ethical, and aesthetic values, bans all "values" as products of emotion, and thus denies mankind's moral personality. Like scientism, pragmatism also denies the moral dimension of man. So, for example, in the case when "great moral decisions of man" (as in the debate over euthanasia) have been made on the basis of a "vote of the parliamentary majority."

The Pope sees the greatest danger in nihilism, which, as the Nietzsche revival in eastern and western Europe shows, is exercising great influence on the thinking of intellectuals today. For the Pope, nihilism is the "denial of man's humanity and his identity." It creates the possibility of "wiping out of man's nature the truths which reveal his likeness to God, so that it drives him progressively either toward a destructive will to power, or into the despair of loneliness." This nihilism has found its confirmation above all in the horrifying experience of evil in this century.

Against this, the Pope, in the middle of his encyclical, presents the idea of the "splendor of truth," which he constructs out of the idea of *Dei verbum* (the word of God) and of man as *imago Dei* (the image of God). The idea of the universality of truth, which is accessible to all people—believers as well as non-believers—and which must, in the face of the tasks of the next millennium, be made accessible through the cooperation of philosophy and faith in ever-deeper understanding, runs through the encyclical as a basic idea.

The cooperation of philosophy and faith

In compressed form, the Pope transmits in these 179 pages a history of the cooperation between philosophy and faith. He points to the influence which the fundamental truths contained in the Old Testament, in the book of Wisdom and the book of Proverbs, exerted, in the same way as Greek philosophy, especially Platonic philosophy, exerted in Christianity.

Already in its introduction, the encyclical establishes that there have been, since ancient times, common roots of knowledge, which, in turn, are the same expression for the uniqueness of human creative reason and underline the universality of truth:

"In both East and West, we may trace a journey which has led humanity down the centuries to meet and engage truth more and more deeply. It is a journey which has unfolded as it must within the horizon of personal self-consciousness: The more human beings know reality and the world, the more they know themselves in their uniqueness, with the question of the meaning of things and of their very existence becoming ever more pressing. . . . The admonition Know yourself was carved on the temple portal at Delphi, as testimony to a basic truth to be adopted as a minimal norm by those who seek to set themselves apart from the rest of creation as human beings, that is as those who know themselves.

"Moreover, a cursory glance at ancient history shows clearly how in different parts of the world, with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: 'Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?' These are the questions which we find in the sacred writings of Israel, as also in the Veda and the Avesta; we find them in the writings of Confucius and Lao-Tze, and in the preaching of Tirthankara and Buddha; they appear in the poetry of Homer and in the tragedies of Euripides

and Sophocles, as they do in the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. They are questions which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. In fact, the answer given to these questions decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives.”

The work of the Apostle Paul

With special devotion, the Pope enters into the work of the Apostle Paul, whose speech and metaphors are very closely related to the Pope’s method of thinking, as is the passionate expression of St. Augustine.

In contradiction to the heathen idolators and sophists, Paul proclaimed the elementary truth of the Christian faith on his many missionary trips, while he moved the understanding of the “love” of the Creator into the center of his instruction.

“Developing a philosophical argument in popular language, the Apostle declares a profound truth: Through all that is created the eyes of the mind can come to know God. Through the medium of creatures, God stirs in reason an intuition of his power and his divinity (cf. Rom 1:20). . . .

“According to the Apostle, it was part of the original plan of the creation that reason should without difficulty reach beyond the sensory data to the origin of all things: the Creator.”

Whoever has studied Paul’s letters, has clearly noted, as does the encyclical, that Paul points out a difference between the “wisdom of this world” and the wisdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ. This dilemma is raised especially at the beginning of the first letter to the Corinthians. “The true key-point, which challenges every philosophy, is Jesus Christ’s death on the Cross. . . . Where is the one who is wise? Where is the learned? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Cor 1:20), the Apostle asks. The wisdom of the wise is no longer enough for what God wants to accomplish; what is required is a decisive step towards welcoming something radically new: God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. . . . ; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not to reduce to nothing things that are (1 Cor 1:27-28). Human wisdom refuses to see in its own weakness the possibility of its strength; yet Saint Paul is quick to affirm: When I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:10). Man cannot grasp how death could be the source of life and love; yet to reveal the mystery of his saving plan God has chosen precisely that which reason considers foolishness and a scandal. Adopting the language of the philosophers of his time, Paul comes to the summit of his teaching as he speaks the paradox: God has chosen in the world . . . that which is nothing to reduce to nothing things that are (cf. 1 Cor 1:28). In order to express the gratuitous nature of the love revealed in the Cross of Christ, the Apostle is not afraid to use the most radical language of the philosophers in their thinking about God. Reason cannot eliminate the mystery of love which the Cross represents, while the

Cross can give to reason the ultimate answer which it seeks.”

So Paul, as Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, has arrived at the point of “establishing the first great synthesis of philosophical thought, in which the currents of Greek and Latin thought flow together.” The Pope writes about how in the Middle Ages, St. Anselm of Canterbury and St. Thomas Aquinas, who, not the least, was also able to conduct an important dialogue with Jewish and Muslim thinkers of his time and who placed harmony between faith and reason in the foreground of

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his doctrine, both referred to Platonic thought as a constructive philosophy.

On the threshold of the third millennium, John Paul II sees, as he expresses in the closing part of the encyclical, that it is *the* great mission of the church, to, in the spirit of this philosophical/theological tradition, put the challenge to mankind, and, with much stronger connections to philosophy, to embark on the ecumenical dialogue with other religions and cultures. Precisely in this intellectual dialogue lies a source of enrichment for the Christian faith. In order to resolve the tasks which lie ahead of us, and to contribute to the progress of humanity, the Pope turns at the end to admonish philosophers, and also natural scientists, that they must not lose sight of the “horizon of wisdom” in the course of their research.

“Finally, I cannot fail to address a word to scientists, whose research offers an ever greater knowledge of the universe as a whole and of the incredibly rich array of its component parts, animate and inanimate, with their complex atomic and molecular structures. So far has science come, especially in this century, that its achievements never cease to amaze us. In expressing my admiration and in offering encouragement to these brave pioneers of scientific research, to whom humanity owes so much of its current development, I would urge them to continue their efforts without ever abandoning the sapiential horizon within which scientific and technological achievements are wedded to the philosophical and ethical values which are the distinctive and indelible mark of the human person. Scientists are well aware that the search for truth, even when it concerns a finite reality of the world or of man, is never-ending, but always points beyond to something higher than the immediate object of study, to the questions which give access to Mystery.”