

FIDES ET RATIO, AND ITS APPLICABILITY IN NEW ZEALAND

Discussion Paper

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Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* (1998), like his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), is foundational. Both deal with our ability to reason, to judge, and to know, which is decisive for exploring, explaining and communicating our faith. In attempting to summarise and simplify this encyclical, my focus will be on its applicability in our own country.

It seems surprising that our ability to reason, to judge and to know could be called into question, but we would be foolish to think otherwise. Our secular culture, and even popular religious thinking, have become pervaded by a soft romanticism that leaves people dependant on their opinion and "feeling". The sheer multiplicity and variety of views and opinions can lead people to distrust even our human ability to reach objective and universally valid truths. How often we hear it said that "no one can judge". All that individuals can do is "make their own choices". In ethical questions, the "right to choose" is proclaimed as self-validating, i.e. there is no need for any criteria beyond what the individual decides: making the choice is enough to make it right.

I'm sure that no self-respecting university would allow this kind of waffle in any other area of learning. But somehow it is supposed to be all right when it comes to the things we need to know most of all.

The Pope was already addressing this kind of scepticism and moral relativism when, in *Veritatis Splendor*, he challenged the view that it belongs to "conscience" to decide what shall be right and wrong. Our Catholic tradition, and the biblical tradition, have always seen conscience as the judgement we make when we apply norms that are not of our own making. This presupposes that we can actually know objective truth. It also presupposes that we attain freedom through our openness to truth. As the Pope reiterates in *Fides et Ratio*, truth and freedom "*either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery*" (n.90).

At stake in all this is ultimately what it means to be a person. The secular ideology of "individualism" makes self-interest (not necessarily selfishness, but even sincere self-interest) the criterion for determining what is true, good, worthwhile, and morally right. Catholic teaching does not understand persons in this atomised way: we are persons in relationship – in relationship to other persons, the world and God. This is what it means to be made the image of a trinity in whom persons exist only in relationship.

Consequently, Catholic teaching understands personal rights as what we need in order to live in right relationships, i.e. responsibly. Rights don't even have to be "balanced" by responsibility; they only exist in function of responsibilities. They are what we are entitled to in order to fulfill our responsibilities. This does not imply a lesser regard for what it means to be oneself; it just means that we become our true selves through being "for others".

In *Fides et Ratio*, the Pope is concerned to reassure people that they can know the truth (cf n.102) – on the basis of which they can also know what is good and right. There was a time when people took this for granted. Faith and reason were seen as “*two wings on which the human spirit could rise to knowing the truth, which is ultimately God, and in knowing God know the truth about ourselves*” (cf F.R. Intro).

It is only in recent centuries that faith and reason became separated, (cf nn.5, 45) producing a deep and widespread scepticism, in which not knowing God and not knowing ourselves also seem to go together.

Some have resorted to a kind of fragmentism, based on “*a concept of democracy which is not grounded upon any reference to unchanging values: whether or not a line of action is admissible is decided by a vote of parliamentary majority.... Even the great moral decisions of humanity are subordinated to decisions taken one after another by institutional agencies*” (n. 89).

Others have simply given up on the human ability to know ultimate objective truth, and have opted for a kind of “nihilism” (cf n.46).

The Pope also speaks of an “undifferentiated pluralism”: faced by the sheer volume and fragmentation of knowledge, people simply conclude that one opinion is as good as the next.

On a *Question of Religion* recently, Noel Cheer and Maureen Geering were applauding the fact that the Internet gives people a way of discussing views where “nobody is in charge” i.e. no one has authority to say whether anything is right or wrong; “people can take responsibility for their own souls”. We need to recognise here a reaction against dogmatic and authoritarian ways. The Pope himself does not hesitate to speak of the search for truth as a journey – based on a prior obligation to seek the truth (cf n.25). Being in the service of the truth,

The believing community (is) a partner in humanity’s shared struggle to arrive at truth; (it also) obliges the believing community to proclaim 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 God (n.2).

The Pope too is opposed to intolerance (n.92) and insists on the need for freedom for the act of faith (n.13). Unfortunately, the Church has not always given the impression that believers are free to do the questioning that leads to new understanding, or that they can do so freely. This helps to create the reaction of people like Noel Cheer.

But the reaction itself is destructive. For Noel Cheer there is no such thing as anyone being led astray “because there is no one right position to stray from”. There is no “centre” or touchstone of orthodoxy. So no one’s views can be judged wrong. In reality, of course, this kind of relativism and pragmatism undermines the very possibility of consensus or even proper debate. “*To believe it possible to know a universally valid truth....is the essential condition of sincere and authentic dialogue between persons*” (n.92).

Noel Cheer did acknowledge that the kind of “freedom” he was advocating did involve risk – the risk of “chaos”. He admitted that he didn’t know how to resolve this problem. Pope John Paul II’s response was *Veritatis Splendor*. But in New Zealand, it is the views of people like Noel that are more likely to be presented to listeners even on a religious programme.

The Pope traces the source of these confusions to the separation of reason and faith, philosophy and theology. He supports the proper autonomy of both, but urgently wants their relationship to each other to be restored.

When philosophy acts without reference to divine revelation, it undermines its ability to pursue its own goal, which is to discover what it means to be human. When faith is deprived of reason, it loses the structures need to explore, articulate and communicate itself (cf n.48).

It is this separation of faith and reason that underlies the widespread assumption that what can” be known by the methods of the sciences simply can’t be known, or isn’t there to be known. The consequences are grave; without any vision of the human person beyond what is accessible to the methods of the sciences, there is no reason for not subjecting persons to the needs of the marketplace, and technology has no ethical criterion beyond itself: the possibility of doing something becomes the sufficient justification for doing it. As I said earlier, what is at stake in all this is what it means to be human. And we can only know of the transcendent dignity of human persons through divine revelation and faith (cf n.83).

The separation of faith and reason has also impacted on faith. Luther’s original put-down of nature and reason, and Calvin’s radical interpretation of scripture alone and grace alone, live on in the inability of some mainstream Protestant churches to resolve fundamental ethical issues (on the basis of scripture alone), and in biblical fundamentalism and the harm it does. Within all our churches, the disfunction of faith and reason shows up in a primary emphasis on subjectivity and a scepticism regarding the possibility of expressing faith in universally valid doctrines (cf n.53).

Philosophy too has suffered. Some streams of philosophy have ditched any interest in metaphysics (nn.55, 61); they limit themselves to the study of how we know and how we communicate, and leave aside the content of what we can ultimately know. The resulting “*crisis of confidence in the powers of reason*” has serious consequences for the faith (cf nn.55, 84).

The Pope addresses these concerns to bishops, and he will be satisfied with nothing less than reaffirming

strongly the conviction that the human being can come to a unified and organic vision of knowledge. This is one of the tasks which Christian thought will have to take up through the next millennium of the Christian era. The segmentation of knowledge, with its splintered approach to the truth and consequent fragmentation of meaning, keeps people today from coming to an interior unity. How could the Church not be concerned by this? It is the gospel which imposes this sapiential

task directly upon her pastors, and they cannot shrink from their duty to undertake it (n.85)..

As a teacher of the faith, the Pope looks to the scriptures and finds that

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. The world and all that happens within it, including history and the faith of peoples, are realities to be observed, analysed and assessed with all the resources of reason, but without faith ever being foreign to the process. 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. Thus the world and the events of history cannot be understood in depth without professing faith in the God who is at work in them.... reason and faith cannot be separated without diminishing the capacity of men and women to know themselves, the world and God in an appropriate way (n.16).

The way the Pope explains the impact of philosophy on the different areas of theology has consequences for those of us who send priests or religious to do high studies.

The Pope also addresses those who do philosophy, and chooses to encourage them:

I cannot but encourage philosophers – be they Christian or not – to trust in the power of human reason and not to set themselves goals that are too modest in their philosophising. The lesson of history in this millennium now drawing to a close shows that this is the path to follow: it is necessary not to abandon the passion for ultimate truth, the eagerness to search for it or the audacity to forge new paths in the search. 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 (n.56).

He urges them especially to recover the sapiential dimension of knowing because he sees that as giving the “ultimate framework of the unity of human knowledge and action” (n.81).

As we would expect of John Paul, his primary focus is always on Christ (n.7). What God wants us to know about ourselves cannot be reduced to statements and documents. It can only be revealed in a Person (nn.32-34). In Christ we discover how much we mean to God. “Knowing” becomes a matter of accepting and loving this person, in a relationship for which we are enabled by the Holy Spirit.

Discussion Questions

1. Who, in society and in the Church, do we need to reach with John Paul's teaching on the relationship between faith and reason?

2. Who in the Church, are those best placed to reach them (n. 1 above)?
3. How can we who are leaders equip those who represent the Church (n.2 above) for this task?