

Faith and Reason¹

Homily for Lent 5

March 17-18th 2018

On September 14, 1998 St John Paul II promulgated his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, (*Faith and Reason*) It opens with an unforgettable image:

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

Yet this is spoken to a “one-winged” world in which faith is increasingly seen as unreasonable and unnecessary to apprehend truth and to live a good life. Nonetheless, the Saint completes these first words with a clear statement of faith:

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)

This premise is continued in the encyclical’s introduction, entitled “Know Yourself.” He observes that all the great world religions grapple with the basic human questions about good and evil, the meaning of our existence and the possibility of an “after life.” The Church has a special *way of teaching this* particularly in the proclamation of Jesus Christ as “the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6) (2.1). Yet, our understanding of faith will remain partial until “the final Revelation of God” at the second coming of Jesus Christ.

One way to come to know truth is receiving God’s revelation of truth through faith; the other way is through reason. Reason is associated with philosophy and faith with theology.

Philosophy means, “love of wisdom” and theology means, “study of God.” Philosophy regards natural knowledge and theology regards supernatural knowledge. We might also say that philosophy pertains only to what we can know by raw reason, whereas theology pertains to truths known through prophecy or divine revelation.

When the Greek philosopher Plato discussed whether the human soul existed after death, he was engaged in philosophy – a reasoned argument. However, when Moses spoke of the will of the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” he was engaged in revealing divine truths. This accords with theology. Philosophy does not appeal to prophecies or divinely revealed information—theology does. Philosophy is the body of knowledge that we can know by reason. Theology is the body of knowledge that we can know by divine revelation

For example, someone living on an island in the middle of nowhere can know the truth that God exists. This is something that unaided reason can lead a person to know. It is a philosophical truth that does not require religion. There have been plenty of people in history who believed in

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Taylor Marshall whose book :Thomas Aquinas in 50 Pages helped to clarify the distinction between philosophy and theology.

one God without the help of the Bible. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero are examples of thinkers who postulated a highest God who reigned over all.

(The following paragraph was not part of the homily as given at Mass but I have included it here because it is an important argument for the existence of God and want to share it with the reader).

The argument from contingency was one of St. Thomas Aquinas' five arguments for the existence of God. It states:

- 1. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, that come into being and go out of being, that is, contingent beings.*
- 2. We assume that every being is a contingent being.*
- 3. For each contingent being, there is a time it does not exist.*
- 4. Therefore it is impossible for these always to exist.*
- 5. Therefore there could have been a time when no things existed.*
- 6. Therefore, at that time there would have been nothing to bring the currently existing contingent beings into existence.*
- 7. Therefore, nothing would be in existence now.*
- 8. We have reached an absurd result from assuming that every being is a contingent being.*
- 9. Therefore not every being is a contingent being.*
- 10. Therefore, some being exists of its own necessity, and does not receive its existence from another being, but rather causes them. This all men speak of as God)*

Other philosophical truths include the fact that God is different from creation, that humans are different from other animals, that humans have a soul, and that there are moral laws. “Thou shalt not kill” is a philosophical truth that can be known by reason. Even these moral norms can be known without recourse to religion or the Bible.

There are also theological truths that can never be known by reason but are nevertheless true. For example, Christians believe “God is the Blessed Trinity”. This is a revealed truth. The Trinity cannot be known by reason alone. It is revealed by God and held by faith. Similarly, “baptism is a sacrament” or “Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead,” are theological truths known by revelation and apprehended by faith. See the comparison below:

Philosophical Truths: Known by Reason

- God exists
- God is one
- Humans have immortal souls
- Do not steal

Theological Truths: Known by Divine Revelation

- Jesus is the Son of God
- Heaven and Hell
- Baptism is a sacrament

- Jesus shall judge the living and the dead

In *Faith and Reason* St. John Paul called upon the Church's bishops, to whom the encyclical is addressed, to proclaim the truth of the Gospel of Christ with such conviction and clarity that humanity's confidence in our ability to know the truth (including through philosophy) will be restored (6.2). Pope John Paul II was especially concerned that unless this is done, the younger generation

“having no valid points of reference ... will stumble through life to the very edge of the abyss [of meaninglessness]” (6.3²)

Natural reason” can discover certain truths he writes, but he then says

“there are proposed for our belief mysteries hidden in God which, unless they are divinely revealed, cannot be known” (9).

Philosophy and the sciences function within the order of natural reason; while faith, enlightened and guided by the Spirit, recognizes in the message of salvation the “fullness of grace and truth” (cf. Jn. 1:14) which God has willed to reveal in history and definitively through his Son, Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Jn. 5:9; Jn. 5:31–32). (9)³

As we see this relationship we can better understand why the encyclical begins with this vivid image:

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

I have delved into the two wings on which the human spirit rises because of our Gospel for today. In it St. John tells us:

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

Greeks, the fathers of philosophical thought wanted to see Jesus, the one who fully brought to earth God's revealed word because he is God. In other words, here were people who recognized:

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

² Schreck, A. (2012). [*The Legacy of Pope John Paul II: The Central Teaching of His 14 Encyclical Letters*](#) (pp. 131–132). Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing.

³ Schreck, A. (2012). [*The Legacy of Pope John Paul II: The Central Teaching of His 14 Encyclical Letters*](#) (p. 132). Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing.

It is worth noting that in this passage Andrew and Philip were the two Apostles who have Greek names. Once they convey to Jesus the request of the Greeks, listen to what he says:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Now if you are familiar with the Gospel of John you will know that earlier in the Gospel, chapters 2, 7 and 8, Jesus refers to his hour not having yet come. (2.4; 7.30; 8.20). But now that the Greeks are seeking him, his hour has arrived. The hour of course refers to the Passion when, as Jesus says in verse 32:

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”

The Greeks are representative of the Gentile world and what we discover is the very thing John Paul II declared in Faith and Reason.

“natural reason” can discover certain truths, “there are proposed for our belief mysteries hidden in God which, unless they are divinely revealed, cannot be known”.

This is what these Greeks understood. They wanted to see Jesus to discover something else the Holy Father wrote in 1998.

“Men and women can accomplish no more important act in their lives than the act of faith; it is here that freedom reaches the certainty of truth and chooses to live in that truth”⁴

When we choose to appropriate the faith joined to the use of the faculty of human reason we discover the wonder of dignity of what it means to be human. Jesus showed us that the fulness of Revelation could only be accomplished when the Greeks could say, we need Jesus, we need the wing of faith to complement of wing of reason.

When this happens in the life of a person St. John Paul writes:

Not only does Christian revelation, accepted through faith, enable people to know the truth about God, but also to know the truth about themselves: “to embrace the ‘mystery’ of their own life”⁵

Therefore:

the knowledge proper to faith does not destroy the mystery; it only reveals it the more.... Christ the Lord ... ‘fully reveals man to himself and makes clear his supreme calling,’ which is to share in the divine mystery of the life of the Trinity”⁶

⁴ Schreck, A. (2012). [*The Legacy of Pope John Paul II: The Central Teaching of His 14 Encyclical Letters*](#) (p. 133). Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing.

⁵ Schreck, A. (2012). [*The Legacy of Pope John Paul II: The Central Teaching of His 14 Encyclical Letters*](#) (pp. 133–134). Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing.

⁶ Schreck, A. (2012). [*The Legacy of Pope John Paul II: The Central Teaching of His 14 Encyclical Letters*](#) (p. 134). Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing.

This is what, at her best, Catholicism professes and lives. May we desire to see Jesus as we journey towards Holy Week and say Amen to these poetic words:

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