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## *After Fides et Ratio: New Models for a New Millennium*

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# After *Fides et Ratio*: New Models for a New Millennium

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We are a few days short of the second anniversary of the publication of *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II's encyclical on the relationship between faith and reason (September 14, 1998). We are also a bit more than a month beyond the one hundred and twenty first anniversary of the publication of *Aeterni Patris*, Pope Leo XIII's encyclical mandating instruction in the Christian philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas in the seminary education of Catholic priests (August 4, 1879). The historical significance of that earlier document is quite clear: The Neo-Thomist intellectual movement that Pope Leo's encyclical of a century ago endorsed played a major role in the shaping of Catholic theology at least up to Vatican Council II (cf. FR 57). Even today, when neo-Thomism no longer [holds] the dominant position it held in Catholic thought after the publication of *Aeterni Patris* (McCool, *The Neo-Thomists* 157), a knowledge of the course of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Neo-Thomism remains an important resource for understanding the directions Catholic theology has taken subsequent to the close of the Council in 1965.

It is, of course, far too early to make any firm judgment about the eventual historical impact of John Paul II's encyclical. There are, nonetheless, some intriguing correlations between these two documents that suggest what might come to pass as a result of this effort to articulate the relationship between faith and reason in the context of our contemporary globalized culture. Whereas Leo XIII's encyclical was one of the first of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II's seems likely to be one of the last of his pontificate. Both documents reflect, though in notably different ways, the accomplishments of the Church Councils that preceded them. The scope of *Aeterni Patris* was relatively circumscribed in terms of the specific reforms it proposed. It sought to put the understanding of faith and reason articulated in *Dei Filius* (Vatican I's Apostolic Constitution on Faith) into the content and practice of seminary education by prescribing the neo-Thomist ideal of scholastic philosophy as the necessary means to equip the Church's ministers for their apostolate in the modern world (McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century* 228). The scope of *Fides et Ratio*, by contrast, is far more wide ranging. It is less concerned with proposing specific reforms in educational practice as it is with identifying and assessing a number of key intellectual and cultural currents at work in the contemporary world. In so doing, it offers a particular instance of the crucial task articulated for the Church in *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World*), i. e., the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel (GS 4).

I would like us to dwell a bit on that phrase scrutinizing the signs of the times in relation to both of these documents. Even though *Aeterni Patris* appeared many decades before Vatican Council II highlighted this phrase, both it and *Fides et Ratio* are efforts to read and respond to the signs of their particular times in history. I hope that by looking (briefly) at how these two documents each approach the intellectual and cultural situation facing Catholic philosophical and theological thinking in their respective eras will enable us to locate better the challenges such thinking is likely to face in the era after *Fides et Ratio* i.e., in the opening decades of the twenty-first century that now lie before us. Since the era ahead of us seems likely to be one in which cultural and intellectual change continue to accelerate even beyond today's often dizzying pace, I think it important to make some effort to extend the horizon against which we read *Fides et Ratio*

into that uncertain future. To do so, moreover, may involve venturing further into some intellectual and cultural territory that *Fides et Ratio* only points out, but does not itself move forward to explore.

The main point that will emerge from such a discussion is that *Fides et Ratio* may very well mark both the conclusion of one chapter in the Church's intellectual history and the beginning of a new chapter that is starting to take shape in this century. Simply put, the chapter coming to a close is one in which the Catholic Church encouraged the investment of a great deal of intellectual capital in efforts to construct a single conceptual system for the work of philosophers and theologians. Such a system, it was hoped, would articulate the underlying unity of our created and redeemed human reality and would clearly show how faith and reason can be, at once, *distinct* from one another yet function *harmoniously* in concert with one another. The great nineteenth century Neo-Thomists envisioned such a unified conceptual system to be the appropriate vessel in which to navigate safely against the treacherous currents of subjectivism, historicism, rationalism, empiricism and relativism that Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy had loosed upon modern culture.

What marks *Fides et Ratio* as the start of a new and potentially exciting chapter in the intellectual history of Catholicism is its recognition (sometimes hesitatingly phrased) that no one conceptual system by itself may have both the suppleness and sharpness needed to articulate fully the richness of the divine and the human realities that interlock the activities of faith and reason in our human lives. Even as it hails the enduring originality of the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas and notes that the Church has been justified in consistently proposing Saint Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology (FR 43), it does not repeat the endorsement that *Aeterni Patris* gives to Aquinas= thought and method as the sole secure philosophical path to truth (AP 24). Instead, *Fides et Ratio* clearly states that The Church has no philosophy of its own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others (FR 49). It concretely acknowledges a legitimate range of philosophical pluralism in the recognition it accords to the genuine accomplishments of a number of movements, such as phenomenology, (FR 59) and individual thinkers, such as Newman, Edith Stein, and Soloviev (FR

74), whose work stands outside the traditions of Neo-Thomism and scholasticism.

In suggesting that *Fides et Ratio* may mark the start of a new chapter in the intellectual history of Catholic thinking, I think it important to make it clear that this may not be an explicit or central aim that John Paul II himself had in composing this text. In fact, a careful reading of the text suggests that of more central concern is an effort to provide a set of links through which current discussions in philosophy may draw upon the resources of the long heritage of philosophical thinking that has been done in the context of Christian faith. A key element in this concern is the sober assessment John Paul II makes of the state of contemporary philosophy. This assessment quite correctly identifies what Lonergan would term a scotoma a blind spot, in much of the academic philosophical work produced in the twentieth century that has often made it difficult for faith to engage philosophy in a mutually constructive dialogue. John Paul II who does not himself use the image of blind spot describes this gap in contemporary philosophical thinking when he calls upon philosophy to recover its *sapiential dimension* as a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life (FR 81). It is only by attending to this dimension, he argues, that philosophy will be able to acknowledge that the human quest for meaning is ordered toward the transcendent reality that is, at once, the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham and Sarah and of Mary and Jesus.

This blind spot arises, at least in part, from the changed role that philosophy has taken in modern culture. Whereas philosophy once functioned as an integrating form of thinking that had as its main concern the articulation of an inclusive meaning for human existence, it has been gradually reduced to one of the many fields of human knowing; indeed in some ways it has been consigned to a wholly marginal role (FR 47). This shift in the role of philosophy is itself indicative of a shift in the larger culture's understanding of reason. For contemporary culture reason's primary function is not one of discerning a larger meaning for human life. Reason's function and main value lies in being an instrument for the acquisition of power, wealth, or whatever end may fall within the ambit of the human capacity for choice. One ironic consequence of the instrumentalization of the value of reason is that reason itself becomes suspect, even for

the very discipline, philosophy, for which it is the central form of inquiry. As John Paul II notes there is the distrust of reason found in much contemporary philosophy, which largely has abandoned metaphysical study of the ultimate human questions in order to concentrate upon problems which are much more detailed and restricted, at times, even purely formal (FR 61).

In noting that reason has itself become suspect in contemporary culture, *Fides et Ratio* points to a larger difference between its analysis of the context it seeks to address and the analysis that Leo XIII proposed for his contemporary context. Whereas *Aeterni Patris* attributed the bitter strife of these days...and the troubles that vex public and private life to the false conclusions concerning divine and human things, which originated in the schools of philosophy [that] have now crept into all the orders of the State (AP 2), *Fides et Ratio* is a bit more hesitant in tracing the ills it sees afflicting the contemporary world directly back to the errors of philosophers. The connection that it draws between flawed philosophical views and cultural practices that threaten the dignity of human persons is more complex than the one operative in *Aeterni Patris*, for which the root of evil practice lies in the error of the intellect: For since it is in the very nature of man to follow the guide of reason in his actions, if his intellect sins at all his will soon follows; and thus it happens that false opinions, whose seat is in the understanding, influence human actions and pervert them (AP 2; cf the recent declaration from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Jesus*, #4 that seems to echo the sentiments of *Aeterni Patris*).

For John Paul II, who makes the mutual relation of truth and freedom a linchpin of his understanding of our human capacities for understanding and action, the matter is not as simple. The human search for truth is so deeply entwined with the exercise of freedom, particularly in entering into interpersonal relationships of mutual trust that a flawed exercise of freedom affects our capacity to acknowledge truth just as much as intellectual error misleads the will (see, for instance FR 33). More is needed to correct a humanly destructive practice than simply an acknowledgment of the intellectual error that may be embedded in it. One consequence of this difference in perspectives is that the tone of *Fides et Ratio* is less combative than *Aeterni Patris* in its treatment of philosophical positions it sees as

problematic with respect to Christian faith. John Paul II certainly offers penetrating criticism of some of the same prevailing errors (AP 31) that Leo XIII hoped a renewed system of instruction in Thomism would refute yet the current pontiff's manner of engagement with the philosophical views that manifest such errors is more dialogical than polemical stance taken by his predecessor.

This difference in perspectives, moreover, has a consequence of far greater importance than the shift in tone that I have just noted. John Paul II's insight into the mutual relationship between truth and freedom enables *Fides et Ratio* to point the dialogue between faith and reason in the direction of the as yet uncharted intellectual and social territory that seems to be emerging from the dynamics of the so-called globalized culture of the twenty-first century. This territory into which the text of *Fides et Ratio* does not itself venture very far is being demarcated by practices within that culture which, in my judgment, have the potential of radically altering not necessarily for the better our very understanding of what it is to be human. A crucial reason, moreover, why the dialogue between faith and reason must enter this territory is the fact that these dynamics challenge what may very well be the most fundamental premise of *Fides et Ratio* namely, that a quest for ultimate and final meaning is basic to the dynamics of human life.

*Fides et Ratio* is by no means novel or unique in locating both faith and reason as aspects of a deeply rooted human need to have one's own life and the context(s) of one's life make sense in a definitive way. As John Paul II expresses it: No one can avoid this questioning [i.e., of whether life has a meaning?]. . . . 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 certitude no longer open to doubt (FR 27). Yet what if it were possible for persons to live in ways that are at least apparently humanly satisfying, but without a framework of definitive meaning? Suppose that the human quest for meaning could be satisfied by a series of discrete, partial episodes of making sense that need not add up to a final, comprehensive framework, or suppose, even more radically, that one, or one's culture, came to accept that the quest for final meaning *need not be satisfied at all*. Suppose most people



considered it not at all problematic to hold that life mostly consists, to use a colloquial expression, of one damn thing after another and that few, if any, felt that there was any urgency to make of it anything more than that.

Such a set of dynamics for living without a framework for final meaning is, I believe, already operative at a number of levels (theoretical, practical, popular) in the emerging cultures of informational, economic and technological globalization. If this is so, then these are the dynamics upon which the dialogue between faith and reason will need to focus in a careful and thorough way ☒ after *Fides et Ratio*. These dynamics are significantly unlike those that have been present in the intellectual and culture currents with which both *Aeterni Patris* and *Fides et Ratio* contend. Those earlier currents were typically modern forms of subjectivism, atheism, historicism, rationalism, empiricism and relativism, which *Aeterni Patris* terms the false conclusions concerning divine and human things, which originated with the schools of philosophy (AP 2), as well as the nihilism that *Fides et Ratio* sees following in their wake (FR 90-91). For most of the chapter of intellectual and cultural history that *Fides et Ratio* may be helping to close, i.e, the chapter that many title modernity, these false conclusions of modernity did not normally contest one crucial piece of common ground they have shared with most philosophical and theological articulations of Christian faith. They all presumed the validity or the significance of a human quest for final meaning, As a result, their quarrels with Christian faith have not typically been about *whether* human beings seek a final meaning but rather about *what*, if anything, *will* indeed *satisfy* that quest.

In contrast, some of the dynamics present in emergent forms of (so-called) post-modern global culture work from a quite different presupposition about the human quest for final meaning and the possibility of its satisfaction. This radically different presupposition is: Meaning *is not and can never be* final, it is only and always a matter of immediacy, contingency and surface. The connections that constitute meaning are merely transient links that one just as easily clicks on as clicks off. Since *every* meaning is evanescent, *any* meaning will do. As a result, one need not regret abandoning one form of meaning for another, or for yet another ☒ after ☒ that. Meanings have only limited, contingent usefulness and, like everything else in a global



marketplace, are disposable once their usefulness for the moment has run its course. These dynamics offer precisely the possibility of setting aside, without (much) regret, that which *Fides et Ratio* sees as a basic to our humanity: a quest for a life-meaning that is unifying and comprehensive. In place of this restless quest for final meaning we can now substitute the transient satisfactions that consist in whatever meaning can be constructed in and from the interrupted and interrupting interplay of life's particularity and contingency.

This presupposition, and the practical consequences that flow from it, is not altogether novel. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish philosopher David Hume eloquently proposed a similar view: An effective cure for the temptation to embark on a quest for final meaning is to find some pleasant diversion that does not purport to exhibit itself as something deeper. (In Hume's case, these diversions at least had the virtue of being social, such as a game of billiards or a glass of good sherry shared with friends; in our case, often enough, it is the privacy of the video screen and the remote.) Such clear-headed recognition of the absence of final meaning need not lead, as it did for the existentialists of the middle third of the last century, to defiance or despair in the face of a cosmos ultimately indifferent to the fate of any of its particular components. In today's context, this recognition simply allows one to get on with making one's way through the partialities and contingencies of one's own life with an equanimity that comes from putting aside as *pointless* any quest for a deeper or final meaning in it.

John Paul II certainly recognizes the presence of a crisis of meaning in contemporary culture (FR 81) and takes note of the postmodernist claim that the human being must now learn to live in a horizon of total absence of meaning, where everything is provisional and ephemeral (F & R 91). In spite of this recognition, the text of *Fides et Ratio* does not seem to me to be incisive enough its treatment of this challenge. To return to an image that I used earlier in this talk, though it points this territory out to us, it does not venture very far in exploring it. Moreover, because it only briefly draws our attention to it, it makes us susceptible to underestimating both the nature and the depth of the challenge that it poses.

The passing glance that *Fides et Ratio* casts upon the absence of meaning could lead us to think that this is just one more intellectual challenge on a par with empiricism, eclecticism, pragmatism, or any of the other isms singled out for analysis and critique in the encyclical. This, I believe, would be a serious mistake. The challenge posed to both faith and reason here is not simply that of another false conclusion. It is, instead, the challenge that is offered by *a way of living*, something that can get so seamlessly woven into the fabric of daily practice that the absence of final meaning in our human makeup becomes unsurprising. It is taken as a matter of course that human life is solely a matter of contingent particularity that need not add up, individually or collectively, to all that much in the end, so long as it adds up for now. The challenge that this way of living at ease in the absence of final meaning presents is quite different from that of previous modern challenges to religious belief and practice. These more typically took form as an articulated theoretical denial or indignant protest (be it social or personal) in the face of claims made on behalf of transcendence. This post-modern challenge is far more likely to be, in practice, an expression of puzzlement or a shrug of indifference before the kind of claim *Fides et Ratio* makes that [all] people seek an absolute which might give to all their searching a meaning and an answer, something ultimate that might serve as the ground of all things (F & R 27). This shrug is directed not so much at the *content* of any claim about ultimate meaning, but at the very possibility that such ultimate meaning, or its denial, is a matter of importance in the business of negotiating one's way through life. As the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has succinctly put it: The threat at the margin of modern non-theistic humanism is: So what? (*Sources of the Self*, 317). The shrug of indifference, moreover, is no longer, as it might have been in the heyday of theoretical atheism, simply about what may be claimed about God; it is about what we may claim about our own humanity.

One way I have found helpful to describe this challenge is to think of it as a leveling of meaning: since all meaning is the same, any meaning will do. As much as we might joke about channel surfing or Web surfing, the click that changes the screen may be indicative of a quite powerful phenomenon at play in our contemporary culture. We quite literally have put in our hands the capacity to click on or click off any range of meaning that presents itself to us. Similarly, the ease

with which we now can connect with each other as fellow human beings is paralleled by the ease with which we may also disconnect from one another: The thirty second glimpse at the HIV ravaged face of sub-Saharan Africa on the evening news is followed by aggressive, sexually evocative images promoting the latest model luxury SUV. The human skills and technologies that have made it possible for us instantaneously and globally to extend our contacts with one another can be exhilarating, but they also have a side that is deeply disquieting. They have also made it possible for us level the rich complexity our human connectedness with one another down to the world of.com. In that world the main form of our connectedness with one another becomes the linear simplicity of economic transactions in the global marketplace. It is a world in which buying and selling become the engine of human connectedness, price serves as the only measure of value and being a consumer constitutes the sum and substance of what it is to be human.

Given the fact that John Paul II has been a tenacious critic of the dynamics of the culture of consumerism, it is a bit surprising, at least to me, that in *Fides et Ratio* he does not link that important element of his thought more closely to his analyses of the intellectual challenges facing the dialogue between faith and reason. He does make it clear that the central issues raised in the encyclical are matters of concern not just to the small circle of academically trained philosophers and theologians. They are, instead, matters that bear upon the life of every human being because the question of life's meaning is inscribed in the heart of every person. Yet the encyclical only subjects to cursory examination what I believe is the far more radical challenge that is being posed to both faith and reason in the practical, everyday world of an emerging culture that is being driven by the dynamics of the so-called global market place. This culture, which would level all human meaning to the status of commodities to be auctioned off, bartered, bought or sold, is one that would have us put aside any larger quest for life meaning. In its place, it holds out before us an elusive promise that we can create for ourselves, out of all the commodities for sale in the global marketplace, a designer satisfaction for the flow of our transient preferences and desires.

Such a promise is, in the long run, an illusory one, but, as Plato long ago illustrated in his tale of human being captivated by flickering

images on the wall of the cave, we should not underestimate our human capacity to take the illusory for the real. What makes the territory ahead of us particularly challenging is that we seem to have in our hands the potentiality for performing what Charles Taylor has chillingly called spiritual lobotomy upon ourselves (*Sources of the Self*, 520). We might just be able to re-imagine ourselves, and thus try to reshape ourselves, as devoid of a quest for larger meaning and thus with neither need nor use for faith or for reason. Although *Fides et Ratio* is of some help in alerting us to this challenge, it unfortunately provides us only with very sketchy guidance for meeting it. For the new chapter of Catholic intellectual history that it opens, it writes only the first sentence. The daunting task of writing the rest of the chapter lies in our hands, and it is a task that will require not only the intellectual acumen of philosophers and theologians but also the willingness of the people of God to live in ways that bear witness to the reality that gives our humanity a meaning that far surpasses anything the market place promises: the God whose very being animates our spirit and whose presence is the only satisfaction of the deepest of our desires.