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Fides et ratio

To the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the relationship between Faith and Reason.



V. THE MAGISTERIUM'S INTERVENTIONS IN PHILOSOPHICAL MATTERS *The Magisterium's discernment as diakonia of the truth*

49. The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others.⁵⁴ The underlying reason for this reluctance is that, even when it engages theology, philosophy must remain faithful to its own principles and methods. Otherwise there would be no guarantee that it would remain oriented to truth and that it was moving towards truth by way of a process governed by reason. A philosophy which did not proceed in the light of reason according to its own principles and methods would serve little purpose. 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.

Yet history shows that philosophy—especially modern philosophy—has taken wrong turns and fallen into error. It is neither the task nor the competence of the Magisterium to intervene in order to make good the lacunas of deficient philosophical discourse. Rather, it is the Magisterium's duty to respond clearly and strongly when controversial philosophical opinions threaten right understanding of what has been revealed, and when false and partial theories which sow the seed of serious error, confusing the pure and simple faith of the People of God, begin to spread more widely.

50. In the light of faith, therefore, the Church's Magisterium can and must authoritatively exercise a critical discernment of opinions and philosophies which contradict Christian doctrine.⁵⁵ It is the task of the Magisterium in the first place to indicate which philosophical presuppositions and conclusions are incompatible with revealed truth, thus articulating the

demands which faith's point of view makes of philosophy. Moreover, as philosophical learning has developed, different schools of thought have emerged. This pluralism also imposes upon the Magisterium the responsibility of expressing a judgement as to whether or not the basic tenets of these different schools are compatible with the demands of the word of God and theological enquiry.

It is the Church's duty to indicate the elements in a philosophical system which are incompatible with her own faith. In fact, many philosophical opinions-concerning God, the human being, human freedom and ethical behaviour- engage the Church directly, because they touch on the revealed truth of which she is the guardian. In making this discernment, we Bishops have the duty to be "witnesses to the truth", fulfilling a humble but tenacious ministry of service which every philosopher should appreciate, a service in favour of *recta ratio*, or of reason reflecting rightly upon what is true.

51. This discernment, however, should not be seen as primarily negative, as if the Magisterium intended to abolish or limit any possible mediation. On the contrary, the Magisterium's interventions are intended above all to prompt, promote and encourage philosophical enquiry. Besides, philosophers are the first to understand the need for self-criticism, the correction of errors and the extension of the too restricted terms in which their thinking has been framed. In particular, it is necessary to keep in mind the unity of truth, even if its formulations are shaped by history and produced by human reason wounded and weakened by sin. This is why no historical form of philosophy can legitimately claim to embrace the totality of truth, nor to be the complete explanation of the human being, of the world and of the human being's relationship with God.

Today, then, with the proliferation of systems, methods, concepts and philosophical theses which are often extremely complex, the need for a critical discernment in the light of faith becomes more urgent, even if it remains a daunting task. Given all of reason's inherent and historical limitations, it is difficult enough to recognize the inalienable powers proper to it; but it is still more difficult at times to discern in specific philosophical claims what is valid and fruitful from faith's point of view and what is mistaken or dangerous. Yet the Church knows that "the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in Christ (*Col 2:3*) and therefore intervenes in order to stimulate philosophical enquiry, lest it stray from the path which leads to recognition of the mystery.

52. It is not only in recent times that the Magisterium of the Church has intervened to make its mind known with regard to particular philosophical teachings. It is enough to recall, by way of example, the pronouncements made through the centuries concerning theories which argued in favour of the pre-existence of the soul,⁵⁶ or concerning the different forms of idolatry and esoteric superstition found in astrological speculations,⁵⁷ without forgetting the more systematic pronouncements against certain claims of Latin Averroism which were incompatible with the Christian faith.⁵⁸

If the Magisterium has spoken out more frequently since the middle of the last century, it is because in that period not a few Catholics felt it their duty to counter various streams of modern thought with a philosophy of their own. At this point, the Magisterium of the Church was obliged to be vigilant lest these philosophies developed in ways which were themselves erroneous and negative. The censures were delivered even-handedly: on the one hand, *fideism*⁵⁹ and *radical traditionalism*,⁶⁰ for their distrust of reason's natural capacities, and, on the other, *rationalism*⁶¹ and *ontologism*⁶² because they attributed to natural reason a knowledge which only the light of faith could confer. The positive elements of this debate were assembled in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, in which for the first time an Ecumenical Council-in this case, the First Vatican Council-pronounced solemnly on the relationship between reason and faith. The teaching contained in this document strongly and positively marked the philosophical research of many believers and remains today a standard reference-point for correct and coherent Christian thinking in this regard.

53. The Magisterium's pronouncements have been concerned less with individual philosophical theses than with the need for rational and hence ultimately philosophical knowledge for the understanding of faith. In synthesizing and solemnly reaffirming the teachings constantly proposed to the faithful by the ordinary Papal Magisterium, the First Vatican Council showed how inseparable and at the same time how distinct were faith and reason, Revelation and natural knowledge of God. The Council began with the basic criterion, presupposed by Revelation itself, of the natural knowability of the existence of God, the beginning and end of all things,⁶³ and concluded with the solemn assertion quoted earlier: "There are two orders of knowledge, distinct not only in their point of departure, but also in their object".⁶⁴ Against all forms of rationalism, then, there was a need to affirm the distinction between the mysteries of faith and the findings of philosophy, and the transcendence and precedence of the mysteries of faith over the findings of philosophy. Against the temptations of fideism, however, it was necessary to stress the unity of truth and thus the positive contribution which rational knowledge can and must make to faith's knowledge: "Even if faith is superior to reason there can never be a true divergence between faith and reason, since the same God who reveals the mysteries and bestows the gift of faith has also placed in the human spirit the light of reason. This God could not deny himself, nor could the truth ever contradict the truth".⁶⁵

54. In our own century too the Magisterium has revisited the theme on a number of occasions, warning against the lure of rationalism. Here the pronouncements of Pope Saint Pius X are pertinent, stressing as they did that at the basis of Modernism were philosophical claims which were phenomenist, agnostic and immanentist.⁶⁶ Nor can the importance of the Catholic rejection of Marxist philosophy and atheistic Communism be forgotten.⁶⁷

Later, in his Encyclical Letter *Humani Generis*, Pope Pius XII warned against mistaken interpretations linked to evolutionism, existentialism and historicism. He made it clear that these theories had not been proposed and developed by theologians, but had their origins "outside the sheepfold of Christ".⁶⁸ He added, however, that errors of this kind should not

simply be rejected but should be examined critically: "Catholic theologians and philosophers, whose grave duty it is to defend natural and supernatural truth and instill it in human hearts, cannot afford to ignore these more or less erroneous opinions. Rather they must come to understand these theories well, not only because diseases are properly treated only if rightly diagnosed and because even in these false theories some truth is found at times, but because in the end these theories provoke a more discriminating discussion and evaluation of philosophical and theological truths".⁶⁹

In accomplishing its specific task in service of the Roman Pontiff's universal Magisterium,⁷⁰ the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith has more recently had to intervene to re-emphasize the danger of an uncritical adoption by some liberation theologians of opinions and methods drawn from Marxism.⁷¹

In the past, then, the Magisterium has on different occasions and in different ways offered its discernment in philosophical matters. My revered Predecessors have thus made an invaluable contribution which must not be forgotten.

55. Surveying the situation today, we see that the problems of other times have returned, but in a new key. It is no longer a matter of questions of interest only to certain individuals and groups, but convictions so widespread that they have become to some extent the common mind. An example of this is the deep-seated distrust of reason which has surfaced in the most recent developments of much of philosophical research, to the point where there is talk at times of "the end of metaphysics". Philosophy is expected to rest content with more modest tasks such as the simple interpretation of facts or an enquiry into restricted fields of human knowing or its structures.

In theology too the temptations of other times have reappeared. In some contemporary theologies, for instance, a certain *rationalism* is gaining ground, especially when opinions thought to be philosophically well founded are taken as normative for theological research. This happens particularly when theologians, through lack of philosophical competence, allow themselves to be swayed uncritically by assertions which have become part of current parlance and culture but which are poorly grounded in reason.⁷²

There are also signs of a resurgence of *fideism*, which fails to recognize the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith, indeed for the very possibility of belief in God. One currently widespread symptom of this fideistic tendency is a "biblicism" which tends to make the reading and exegesis of Sacred Scripture the sole criterion of truth. In consequence, the word of God is identified with Sacred Scripture alone, thus eliminating the doctrine of the Church which the Second Vatican Council stressed quite specifically. Having recalled that the word of God is present in both Scripture and Tradition,⁷³ the Constitution *Dei Verbum* continues emphatically: "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture comprise a single sacred deposit of the word of God entrusted to the Church. Embracing this deposit and united with their pastors, the People of

God remain always faithful to the teaching of the Apostles".⁷⁴ Scripture, therefore, is not the Church's sole point of reference. The "supreme rule of her faith" ⁷⁵ derives from the unity which the Spirit has created between Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church in a reciprocity which means that none of the three can survive without the others.⁷⁶

Moreover, one should not underestimate the danger inherent in seeking to derive the truth of Sacred Scripture from the use of one method alone, ignoring the need for a more comprehensive exegesis which enables the exegete, together with the whole Church, to arrive at the full sense of the texts. Those who devote themselves to the study of Sacred Scripture should always remember that the various hermeneutical approaches have their own philosophical underpinnings, which need to be carefully evaluated before they are applied to the sacred texts.

Other modes of latent fideism appear in the scant consideration accorded to speculative theology, and in disdain for the classical philosophy from which the terms of both the understanding of faith and the actual formulation of dogma have been drawn. My revered Predecessor Pope Pius XII warned against such neglect of the philosophical tradition and against abandonment of the traditional terminology.⁷⁷

56. In brief, there are signs of a widespread distrust of universal and absolute statements, especially among those who think that truth is born of consensus and not of a consonance between intellect and objective reality. In a world subdivided into so many specialized fields, it is not hard to see how difficult it can be to acknowledge the full and ultimate meaning of life which has traditionally been the goal of philosophy. Nonetheless, in the light of faith which finds in Jesus Christ this ultimate meaning, 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 philosophizing. 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.

54. Cf. Pius XII, *Encyclical Letter Humani Generis* (12 August 1950): AAS 42 (1950), 566.

55. Cf. First Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ Pastor Aeternus*: DS 3070; Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium*, 25 c.

56. Cf. *Synod of Constantinople*, DS 403.

57. Cf. *Council of Toledo I*, DS 205; *Council of Braga I*, DS 459-460; *Sixtus V, Bull Coeli et Terrae Creator* (5 January 1586): *Bullarium Romanum* 4/4, Rome 1747, 176-179; *Urban VIII, Inscrutabilis Iudiciorum* (1 April 1631): *Bullarium Romanum* 6/1, Rome 1758, 268-270.

58. Cf. *Ecumenical Council of Vienne, Decree Fidei Catholicae*, DS 902; *Fifth Lateran Ecumenical Council, Bull Apostoli Regiminis*, DS 1440.

59. Cf. *Theses a Ludovico Eugenio Bautain iussu sui Episcopi subscriptae* (8 September 1840), DS 2751-2756; *Theses a Ludovico Eugenio Bautain ex mandato S. Cong. Episcoporum et Religiosorum subscriptae* (26 April 1844), DS 2765-2769.

60. Cf. *Sacred Congregation of the Index, Decree Theses contra Traditionalismum Augustini Bonnetty* (11 June 1855), DS 2811-2814.

61. Cf. *Pius IX, Brief Eximiam Tuam* (15 June 1857), DS 2828-2831; *Brief Gravissimas Inter* (11 December 1862), DS 2850-2861.

62. Cf. *Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, Decree Errorum Ontologistarum* (18 September 1861), DS 2841-2847.

63. Cf. *First Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith Dei Filius*, II: DS 3004; and *Canon 2, 1*: DS 3026.

64. Ibid., IV: DS 3015, cited in *Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes*, 59.

65. *First Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith Dei Filius*, IV: DS 3017.

66. Cf. *Encyclical Letter Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (8 September 1907): ASS 40 (1907), 596-597.

67. Cf. *Pius XI, Encyclical Letter Divini Redemptoris* (19 March 1937): AAS 29 (1937), 65-106.

68. *Encyclical Letter Humani Generis* (12 August 1950): AAS 42 (1950), 562-563.

69. Ibid., loc. cit., 563-564.

70. Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* (28 June 1988), Arts. 48-49: AAS 80 (1988), 873; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian Donum Veritatis* (24 May 1990), 18: AAS 82 (1990), 1558.

71. Cf. *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation" Libertatis Nuntius* (6 August 1984), VII-X: AAS 76 (1984), 890-903.

72. In language as clear as it is authoritative, the First Vatican Council condemned this error, affirming on the one hand that "as regards this faith..., the Catholic Church professes that it is a supernatural virtue by means of which, under divine inspiration and with the help of grace, we believe to be true the things revealed by God, not because of the intrinsic truth of the things perceived by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God himself, who reveals them and who can neither deceive nor be deceived": *Dogmatic Constitution Dei Filius*, III: DS 3008, and Canon 3, 2: DS 3032. On the other hand, the Council declared that reason is never "able to penetrate [these mysteries] as it does the truths which are its proper object": *ibid.*, IV: DS 3016. It then drew a practical conclusion: "The Christian faithful not only have no right to defend as legitimate scientific conclusions opinions which are contrary to the doctrine of the faith, particularly if condemned by the Church, but they are strictly obliged to regard them as errors which have no more than a fraudulent semblance of truth": *ibid.*, IV: DS 3018.

73. Cf. Nos. 9-10.

74. *Ibid.*, 10.

75. *Ibid.*, 21.

76. Cf. *ibid.*, 10.

77. Cf. Encyclical Letter *Humani Generis* (12 August 1950): AAS 42 (1950), 565-567; 571-573.