

Fides et Ratio: The Final Chapter

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I have been asked to comment on the final chapter of *Fides et Ratio*. It may be helpful to recall briefly the contents of that chapter before offering commentary.

Summary of *Fides et Ratio*, Ch. VII: *Current Requirements and Tasks*

The chapter opens with a statement of the requirements imposed upon philosophy by the Word of God, by the configuration of the current situation, and by the nature of philosophy itself. The Word of God provides a conception of the world as contingent, created, generated; of the person as *imago dei*; of evil as rooted in the disorderly exercise of human freedom. The current situation is marked by a crisis of meaning, reflected in the limit by an abandonment of the search for truth. True philosophy, consonant with the Word of God, is required (1) to recover its sapiential dimension, its aspiration to provide a unitary framework for knowledge and action; (2) to verify the capacity to know reality objectively; (3) to restore and articulate a metaphysics, especially a metaphysics of the person. This last requirement is touted as the path out of the present crisis, especially as it addresses the crisis of confidence in reason occasioned by developments in hermeneutics and philosophy of language, and the fragmentation of meaning by the multiplication of modes of thinking and specializations of human inquiry. This re-enthronement of metaphysics is tied tightly to the recovery of the Christian philosophical tradition as something we "belong to," not something we "dispose of."

A list is then provided of dangerous currents of thought in the present to be averted by alliance with the Christian philosophical tradition -- eclecticism, historicism and modernism, positivism and scientism, pragmatism, and immanentism -- all of which are regarded as signposts on the path to nihilism, the meaningless antithesis of the meaning of the Word of God. The broad cultural movement named 'post-modernism' is described as nihilistic, a destructive critique of every certitude. We are warned about the

temptation to despair, on the one hand, and about the illusion of demiurgic control of our destiny, on the other.

The second section of the chapter turns to current tasks for theology as a discipline that mediates between the content of faith and variable cultural matrices. Theology's prime concern should be to understand the truths of faith. This involves, first, the interpretation of sources, and so also a reliance upon philosophical solutions to problems of the relation of meaning to truth, of fact to meaning, of objectivity in historical investigation -- all of which pertain to the problem of the historicity of doctrines. Pre-empting, as it were, these philosophical considerations, the "objective value of many concepts" and the existence of concepts which retain universal epistemological value across cultures and history, are affirmed. Understanding the truths of faith unfolds as dogmatic theology, which requires a philosophy of being or metaphysics, and as moral theology, which requires a philosophical anthropology, a philosophical ethics, and a metaphysics of the good. There is a further unfolding of theology in Catechesis, which requires philosophical positions on the relation of truth to life, event to doctrinal truth, transcendent truth to human language. Finally, in the position of an afterthought, it is noted that this complicated theological *praxis* should be informed by Christian holiness and the practice of natural and supernatural virtues. It is not only the philosopher whose reason should be informed by faith.

The final section restates the main points of the Encyclical: the historical reciprocity of faith and reason, and of theology and philosophy, is to be recovered, both at the level of intellectual inquiry and at the practical level of evangelization. Specific encouragement is offered theologians, philosophers, and scientists (very briefly), and everyone is asked to look more deeply at the human being's unceasing search for truth and meaning. This last request echoes the emphasis throughout the Encyclical on renewed attention to the seemingly inevitable human search for truth as an initial step toward putting a stop to the collapse into nihilism.

Commentary

One cannot very well comment on the final chapter of the Encyclical without commenting, to some extent, on everything that has led up to it. Any kind of detailed commentary on the whole, given the time limits, is of course impossible. So my comments will be about the whole Encyclical, but at a fairly high level of generality.

I am strongly sympathetic with the aims and intentions of this document. I don't read it, as far as I can tell, as a conscious adherent of any of the modern or postmodern trends anathematized by it. I feel obliged to say this, because it seems to me only natural to expect a philosopher in the present day, upon being told by the Magisterium the requirements of his or her discipline -- upon being told that he or she may be practicing "false philosophy" -- to be chary, a bit prickly, resistant, quite unsympathetic, or even dismissive. But I resonate strongly with the document's call for a renewal of faith in reason and of reasoned faith, for I think that in taking this call seriously we are forced us to confront head-on *the problem of our epoch*. The problem is one that the secular theorists of our century, no less than the Christian theologians, despite noble efforts, have failed thus far to solve. As the Encyclical proclaims, the crisis of our epoch is not a crisis of *faith*, but a crisis of *meaning*, and the problem it invites us to confront I would name, for ease of reference, *the problem of history and truth*. But, as I'll try to explain, I'm not at all sure that the Encyclical's author or authors have grasped the full dimensions of the problem or have fully confronted it.

Let me begin, then, by attempting to illustrate, from my own experience, the intimate proximity of the problem. I am not inclined to approach this document with historicist assumptions about the insurmountable relativity of its meaning to the time and place of its composition, as though it were merely another expression of meanings in Vatican City. Neither, however, do I approach it with classicist assumptions about the absolute independence of its meaning from the context of meanings of the place and time of its conception. I approach it, in other words, as a document with its own historicity, and so as a document to be interpreted; but, at the same time, I think correct interpretation possible, and the truths it tries to express capable of transcending the place and time of their expression.

I ask you to note that this brief methodological meditation contains within it very large and complex philosophical problems. There is a very striking quotation from Bonaventure in the concluding section of the document [105], which is aimed directly at theologians and their reading of philosophy. But, I surmise, it is meant as well for all readers of the document. St. Bonaventure recognized the inadequacy of "reading without repentance, knowledge without devotion ..." Without at all wishing to diminish the importance of this caution -- for it affirms the close ties of faith and reason -- I don't think it addresses the problem implicit in my brief methodological meditation. Again, as the Encyclical insists, the contemporary crisis is not one of *faith*, but one of *meaning*. So I begin by asking you to note my very *timely* hesitation to

read this document in the manner of one *immediately* confronting -- even faithfully confronting -- objective truths; and I ask you to note the virtually irresistible inclination to read it -- indeed, the virtual impossibility in the late 20th century of *not* reading it -- as an historical expression of human meaning. The ideas presented in the document are mediated by acts of meaning, however elevated and elevating those ideas may be. For the historicist, with the realization that hermeneutics and critical historical method are required, the game is over, and the outcome is a big win for relativism. For someone like myself, that realization is the crack of the starting-gun for a new game with new, more complex rules, a number of which are not yet fully understood.

The philosopher, then, need not be immediately resistant to, and suspicious of, the truth claims in the document, in historicist fashion. But he or she may still be -- as true philosophers always have been -- a more or less annoying presence. As the writers of the Encyclical put it, philosophy is the mirror of its culture. If its culture is puzzled by problems unforeseen by earlier ages, this perplexity will, or should, achieve philosophical expression. I realize I am coming dangerously close here to shifting the focus from "the current tasks of philosophy and theology" about which the document aims ultimately to speak, to "the *notion* of the current tasks as meant in this document." You may recall the Encyclical's complaint about contemporary religious studies which focus on "notions of God" rather than on God. Still, as my opening meditation reveals, I just can't seem to get at what the document means without considering the meanings it expresses *as* expressed meanings. But this is precisely the problematic issue at hand, and it bears directly upon the current tasks of philosophy and theology.

Now, it is especially difficult to interpret a document which, in all likelihood, was written by a committee charged, at once, with articulating a normative position, anticipating likely objections, and ringing all the right bells for a wide range of readers, all listening with ears tuned to pick up the sounds of their pet positions. I tend to view the Encyclical as a political document -- I certainly wouldn't call it an intellectual treatise; rather, a very thoughtful pronouncement by the Magisterium which aims to guide action, in this case, the high-cultural *praxis* of contemporary philosophers and theologians. In political documents, emphasis is almost everything. It sets the tone, provides the sound-bites, defines acceptable future courses of action to be constituted by new acts of meaning. Emphasis reflects an effort to control

meaning now and in the future. So I want to focus briefly on what I take to be the emphases in this document and, in doing so, bring to light what I regard as problematic in it.

I am struck, first of all, by the evocation of traditional aspirations and outlooks, without similar attention being paid to the radical need for assimilation of what the document refers to as "the significant enrichment in a variety of fields" in the modern period. It is relatively easy, I would say, to call for a faithful resistance to eclecticism, historicism, scientism, pragmatism, and nihilism. It is extremely difficult, on the other hand, to develop a philosophy which fully assimilates the recent developments in human meaning which, precisely because they fall outside the comprehension of the traditional integrations, have given rise to radical doubts about the wisdom of seeking the traditional sorts of integration -- radical doubts about traditional ideals of knowledge and objectivity and being which control the heuristics of traditional integrations. There seems to me to be a danger, one not mentioned in the document, of faithful adherence to traditional ideals and conceptions, without successful assimilation of the new learning and without full appropriation of the lessons the new learning has to teach us about ourselves and our acts of meaning.

Leo XIII's call in the last century for the recovery of Aquinas, in the Encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, was equally a call for the "augmentation and perfection of the old by the new" (*vetera novis augere et perficere*); yet, for the most part, only a few exceptional Catholic thinkers took on the task of coming to terms with modern meaning and the new learning -- with new geometries, new cosmology, new human sciences, philology, and critical history. The rest settled into what has been described as the "Catholic ghetto" and were by-passed by the new developments. I venture to say that John Paul II, in this document at least, has been less emphatic than Leo XIII about assimilating and appropriating the new learning, and more emphatic about calling those thinkers who ventured beyond the ghetto back to a philosophical tradition which predated the new learning. Despite its occasional bows to the enrichment of our apprehension of human life by 20th century phenomenologies, I frankly don't see in the Encyclical's outline of current requirements a sufficient sensitivity to the danger of re-ghetto-ization and the further diminishment of the influence of Christian philosophy and theology on contemporary culture. There is surely *some* sensitivity to this danger, but it is overshadowed in my opinion by the pillorying of the present that goes on here, by the focus upon the *clash* of the new learning with traditional philosophical aspirations,

and by a renewed call for the resurrection, without appropriate qualifications, of Thomas Aquinas as 'model'.

I am assuming, and I think it is also assumed by the writers of the Encyclical, that it is not from the new learning that we are to withdraw, but only from the "dangerous currents" which flow from the clash of the methods and results of the new learning with traditional expectations -- which flow, that is, from the failure to reconcile the new learning with the old 'taken-to-be-known', including its traditional ideals of knowledge, objectivity, reality. So, what is needed, it seems to me, is a successful *new* integration of the Christian faith with the new learning. But, the emphasis upon 'recovery' in the document is fraught with dangerous ambiguity. This 'recovery' requires, I think, something of which little is said in the document, viz., *radically critical appropriation* of the tradition, as something quite different from mere 'recovery' of it and 'alliance' with it, at least in certain common meanings of those terms. The crisis, again, is not a crisis of *faith*, but a crisis of *meaning*. Unfortunately, the notion of meaning at work in the document is also ambiguous. Sometimes it pertains to "the ultimate meaning of life" and to "the loss of the *telos*" in human life. And sometimes, but never as clearly I'd say, it pertains to the challenge posed by the new learning itself, as a new set of modes of meaning -- as, one may argue, the unfolding of the implications of the late modern establishment of the notion of 'meaning', which played virtually no systematic role in the tradition we are asked to recover, as a *central category*. While it is clear that these two meanings of 'meaning' are closely related, it seems to me that their significant differences are never noted and that, as a result, the second usage is given short shrift by the author(s) of the Encyclical.

My question, then, about the Encyclical and its message is this: Does the Encyclical adequately grasp and articulate the demands of the present age or moment -- what Max Scheler, in his ethical works, called the *kairos* -- or does it harbor too narrow and suspicious a vision of modernity and post-modernity as slouching, new methods and all, toward the nadir of intellectual and moral decline? Again, does the Encyclical invite the re-enthronement of a traditional metaphysics wedded to controlling conceptions of knowledge, objectivity, and reality which the new learning has as a matter of fact, and rightfully, left behind?

Note that the untoward consequences of modern dominance by the Baconian *organon*, or toolbox for the control of meaning, are frankly acknowledged and, moreover, condemned as Promethean pride, in

the Encyclical. But the Encyclical gives no sign of recognizing that the intolerable immanentism, positivism, and misplaced technological optimism unmoderated by ethical reflection, may find their roots in this historically emergent way of controlling meaning. The very question of *organons* as controlling meaning, of the far-reaching implications of the fact not only of the historical emergence of *organons* but also of their historical replacement -- the question pressed upon us by the historical experience of repeated epochal shifts in the control of meaning -- remains as a deep tension in the document, which never rises fully to the surface. This tension is manifested still more clearly, I think, by the uneasy relationship in the document between its opening affirmation of the *historical emergence* of reason with the Greeks and its subsequent persistent use of the notion of 'reason' as though it were something *wholly ahistorical* -- *semper idem*, always the same -- one of those "objective concepts" which floats above history in splendid eternity, at one time united with Christian faith, now not, but to be united once again if only we become faithful once again in our use of it.

Again, note that the Encyclical issues no warnings about the *archaism* of renewed alliance with, and reliance upon, the Aristotelian *organon* -- with its ideal of certain knowledge and eternal truths, its supposedly self-evident first principles, its vision of an unchanging human nature, its preference for static, logical systematization, its normative notion of culture, its vision of the human subject as a substance among other substances, its underestimation of the significance of historicity. On the contrary, it emphatically warns against post-modernism and modernism. Yet, one may argue, those same "dangerous currents" against which the Encyclical is anxious to warn us, are themselves consequences of the radical lack of complementarity between the classicist rationality governed by that *organon* and the historical reality mediated and constituted by meaning which the new learning has revealed. But I do not find in the Encyclical a clear acknowledgement of this possibility. Thus, the invitation to 'recover' the tradition is too easily interpreted as an invitation to adopt anew the earlier *organon* or to re-adapt our too-modern selves to that pre-Baconian *organon* -- than as a call both *to critically appropriate* the tradition in light of, and with the aid of, the new learning, and then *to go well beyond it*.

I noted earlier that my comments pertain to emphases in the document. I think it possible to make the argument that the authors of the document are not entirely oblivious to the issue I've raised and that they have simply maintained a calculated rhetorical silence. While the Encyclical *does state* that "... the Church

has been justified in consistently proposing St. Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology," the statement is not made without qualification. Thomas is cited for his insistence on the reasonableness of faith, his openness to further questions, his effort to reconcile the secularity of the world with the radicality of the Gospel, his recognition of the role of the Holy Spirit in the maturing of wisdom, and so forth. These are personal qualities well worth imitating, especially in our day when the philosophical and theological projects confront the challenges of the new learning. They are a "way to do theology." But, on the other hand, further qualifications could have been entered, which pertain to the crisis of meaning and the problem of truth and history. What of Aquinas's methodological assumptions, his historically appropriate reliance on the Aristotelian *organon*, his operative notion of 'science' as certain knowledge of things through their causes, the noteworthy absence from a position of centrality of the notion of meaning as constitutive? These also are a "way to do theology," and philosophy. The Encyclical, then, recalls Aquinas, and recalls us to Aquinas, especially as regards his having united, in himself and for his time, faith and reason. It holds up for us the model of "Aquinas the thinker," but it remains relatively silent on the model of "Aquinas the thought." And, on this, I think, something more should, and could, have been said, without compromising the good intentions behind the Encyclical's claim that the Magisterium has no philosophy of its own -- a claim which I find curious in a number of ways.