

BLESSED JOHN PAUL II ON THE VOCATION AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CATHOLIC PHILOSOPHER

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Introduction

In treating the question of the vocation of the Catholic philosopher according to Blessed John Paul II we have various sources to consider. Karol Wojtyła was himself a philosophy professor and author of numerous articles as well as significant books on philosophy. Pope John Paul II spoke frequently about philosophy and faith and reason, culminating in his thirteenth and penultimate encyclical, *Fides et ratio*. Often “Wojtyła” and “Pope John Paul II” are separated and the work divided at the convenient period of 1978. But to one who studies the work of Wojtyła and then reads the encyclicals of Pope John Paul II, it is clear that the early work in philosophy shines through them, especially in *Redemptor hominis*, *Veritatis splendor* and *Fides et ratio*. I would like to begin this brief study with a few passages from *Fides et ratio*, look back briefly at his work as a philosopher, and then return to *Fides et ratio*.

1. Recovery of vocation in *Fides et ratio*

In the Latin text of *Fides et ratio*, the term “vocationis” is used 8 times and the term “munus” is used 22 times.¹ These terms are used to discuss the vocation and the tasks or responsibilities of philosophy, theology, and the human person as such. The vocations and tasks of philosopher, theologian, and person are interconnected in a dynamic way. The English translation uses various words to render these Latin terms, sometimes interchanging them.² In the first passage in which the terms are used (§6 in the introduction), the English translator uses the same term, vocation, to

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¹ See Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio – Vocationis*: §§6, 13, 33, 60, 71, 76, 107, 108; *Munus*: §§6, 21, 36, 38, 41, 42, 49, 54, 67, 69, 77, 82, 85, 87, 92, 93, 98.

² For a discussion of the meaning of the term *munus*, see Janet E. Smith, “The ‘Munus’ of Transmitting Human Life: A New Approach to ‘Humanae Vitae’”, *Thomist; a Speculative Quarterly Review*, 54:3 (1990: July) pp. 385–427.

translate both *vocationis* and *munus*. In this section Pope John Paul II explains his reason for writing *Fides et ratio*. He links *Fides et ratio* and *Veritatis splendor* as addressing the crisis of truth. This crisis affects especially the young. Young people, he explains, have no “valid points of reference” (fundamental principles). They are unsure whether they can discover the real meaning of life. As a result they stumble through life to the edge of an abyss. John Paul II then criticizes those responsible for this confusion and exhorts philosophers to recover their original vocation:

this happens because those whose vocation [*munus*] it is to give cultural expression to their thinking no longer look to truth, preferring quick success to the toil of patient enquiry into what makes life worth living. With its enduring appeal to the search for truth, philosophy has the great responsibility of forming thought and culture; and now it must strive resolutely to recover its original vocation [*vocationem*].³

Those whose task (*munus*) should be to give cultural expression to their thinking include philosophers as he indicates, but may also include writers, artists, and teachers. The goal of “quick success” suggests the careerism of academician and the commercial success and popularity of writers and artists. Absent is attention to truth and dedication to patient inquiry. Why has this occurred? It is more than moral disorder, although it is that too. Ideological and cultural trends are very much to blame, such as pragmatism, technicism, historicism and subjectivism. But at the root of the dereliction of duty there is the loss of vocation, the loss of calling. Self-promotion and political advocacy are more common traits of the professional philosopher today than divine calling or a Socratic way of life.

John Paul bids us to look to the “original” (pristine) vocation of philosophy, truth seeking. The love of truth provides the motivation for true philosophy. A sincere or true search is repeatedly mentioned by John Paul II, in a manner worthy of Pascal.⁴ How does one generate or recover the passion for truth? Perhaps one step is to see the continuity between fundamental questions about human existence arising through everyday life and asked by common people and philosophical inquiry as John Paul II indicates

³ §6 Inde hoc nempe accidit quod nonnumquam ii, quos munus fere proprium obstringebat ut culturae formis fructus profferrent suarum deliberationum, oculos a veritate abstraherent, cum laboris successum subitum praeferrent patientis inquisitionis labori earum rerum quae vivendo sunt experiendae. Strenue igitur pristinam suam vocationem recuperare debet philosophia cuius grave est officium cogitationem humanam informare nec non humanum ipsum cultum, perpetuo revocando homines ad veritatis perquisitionem.

⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, §§158, 160, 631.

in the very opening section.⁵ A tradition of such inquiry also assists in forming the disposition to truth seeking. Of course, a central claim of *Fides et ratio* is that a lively and well formed faith is one of the best ways to generate and recover the original vocation of philosophy. For example, revelation “has set within history a point of reference” (§14) those reference points absent from culture today. These points of reference, although shrouded in mystery, represent a universal and ultimate truth. The intelligible mystery “stirs the mind to ceaseless effort”. Twice he speaks about the searcher leaving no stone unturned (§§14, 21). Or again, revelation is a “lodestar” against the immanentist habit of mind, lifting up the heart and mind to something greater. This reminds one of Dante’s experience upon leaving the cornice of sloth, pleading for some way to overcome the pull of a dreamy despair: “Hurry on your way and fasten your eyes upon the lure which the eternal King spins with the mighty spheres”.⁶

John Paul II speaks about the subjective and objective aspects of Christian philosophy in section 76. The recovery of the original vocation results as the result of the freedom the mind experiences in embracing the fullness of truth. Maritain would avoid the term Christian philosophy and substitute a new phrase: “philosophy fully considered as such” or “philosophy forging ahead” as distinguished from “Philosophy considered simply as such” or “stumbling philosophy”.⁷ I think this phrasing best captures the spirit of John Paul II’s proposal for the recovery of the vocation of philosophy as truth seeking.

The fundamental principles of this vocation are (i) its sapiential dimension, (ii) its respect for truth as an *adequatio* of mind and reality, and (iii) an

⁵ See Alasdair MacIntyre, “Philosophy recalled to its tasks: a Thomistic reading of *Fides et Ratio*”, *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*, Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 179–196.

⁶ “Bastiti, e batti a terra le calcagne; li occhi rivolgi al logoro che gira lo regne eterno con le rote magne”, Canto XIX. 61–63.

⁷ *Untrammelled Approaches*, 1973, p. 420. See also: “And when, thanks to the efforts of Albert the Great and of St. Thomas (and these two men alone were able to carry it off), Aristotle entered into the service of theology, in the midst of astonishingly contrary circumstances and at the cost of how many battles, an immensely important turning point in history was passed which saved the Christian intelligence and its entire future. Whether there is question of a philosopher or of any man of faith, that faith impregnates the Christian intelligence completely. It deputizes philosophical reason to the single search for Truth, delivering it from its subjection to the world and from any form of servility to the fashions of the times. This is why what we call ‘Christian philosophy’ is a philosophy set free, and ought to be called philosophy *understood fully* as such”. *Untrammelled Approaches*, 1973, p. 266.

engagement with a metaphysical range of thinking, such as questions about God, the soul, and the good.⁸ The vocation will be sustained by faith, for it is a philosophy consonant with the word of God. The mutual influence, the cooperation of faith and reason in this enterprise is of course paramount to the teaching of the encyclical: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth”. The Truth of Christ “holds out to theology and philosophy alike the prospect of support, stimulation and increase (cf. *Eph* 4:15)” (§92).⁹

John Paul II returns to theme recovery of what has been lost or obscured, the love of truth or dedication to truth seeking, and the sapiential and metaphysical cast of thought, at the end of the encyclical, with a personal appeal:

I appeal also to philosophers, and to all teachers of philosophy, asking them to have courage to recover, in the flow of an enduringly valid philosophical tradition, the range of an authentic wisdom and truth – metaphysical truth included – which is proper to philosophical enquiry. They should be open to the impelling questions which arise from the word of God and they should be strong enough to shape their thought and discussion in response to that challenge. Let them always strive for truth, alert to the good which truth contains.¹⁰

At the end of the encyclical, the philosophy professor, now Pope for twenty years, makes an appeal that goes beyond the recovery of search for wisdom and metaphysics, but also appeals to the Word of God. A Socratic philosophy alone will no longer suffice, it is undermined by professionalism and the loss of those points of reference, provided by the stories of gods and heroes. We now need an Augustinian philosophy, a philosophy born in love and made consonant with the Word of God. The cultural crisis can only be withstood by an appreciation of the full dignity and destiny of the human person. Pope John Paul II learned this lesson from the depth of the bitter but ultimately hopeful experience of post-war Catholic Poland, a culture deeply formed by faith.

2. Wojtyła’s Early Philosophical Project

In a very important article summarizing his philosophical work on the human person, “The Person: Subject and Community”, written in 1976,

⁸ See my “St. Thomas Aquinas, Thomism, and a ‘Philosophy Consonant with the Word of God’”. *Seminary Journal* 11, no. 1 (2005): 47–55.

⁹ “Veritas, quae Christus est, ubique auctoritate universali se imponit quae gubernat, incitat et prosperat tum theologiam tum etiam philosophiam”. *Fides et ratio* §92.

¹⁰ §106.

Cardinal Wojtyła explained the reason why he took his distinctive approach to philosophy in *The Acting Person*, combining phenomenology and Aristotelian philosophy.¹¹ He said, “the subjectivity of the human person is a problem of paramount philosophical importance today”. It is connected to the appreciation of human dignity. “The problem of the subjectivity of the person – particularly in relation to human community – imposes itself today as one of the central ideological issues that lie at the very basis of human praxis, morality (and thus also ethics), culture, civilization, and politics. Philosophy comes into play here in its essential function: philosophy as an expression of basic understandings and ultimate justifications. The need for such understandings and justifications always accompanies humankind in its sojourn on earth, but this need becomes especially intense in certain moments of history, namely, in moments of great crisis and confrontation” (PC 220). The idea that philosophy as offering “basic understandings and ultimate justifications” is similar to the notion of giving cultural expression to thought and providing fundamental principles or reference points for the young.

From the experience of Poland, Cardinal Wojtyła spoke about the crisis in terms of the confrontation with a materialistic interpretation of life, having at its disposal such powerful means of indoctrination and social and cultural control. At the root of the controversy was the question of the human person: “the truth about the human being has a privileged place in the whole process”. Neither cosmology nor philosophy of nature was as central to the cultural role of philosophy as was philosophical anthropology. His turn to phenomenology was motivated by his desire to enrich the truth of Thomistic philosophy so as to offer the best defense of the “irreducible” in man and to highlight the dignity of the person (PC 210-213). In the *Acting Person* Wojtyła leads the reader to the rediscovery of conscience against the degradation of materialism of totalitarian ideology, and subsequently the degradation of liberal reductionism and cultural deformations of the west. Dedication to truth, moral truthfulness, is the highest achievement of the person. His concern for “the acting person”, as he says, equipped him to do battle with Marxism, but his great insights were derived from his deep personal interest in man and his education in the philosophy of Aristotle and St Thomas. This initial seed burgeoned into a personal “mission” when Wojtyła found his calling. In describing his own calling, John Paul writes that “when I discovered my priestly vocation, man became the *central theme of my pastoral work*.”

¹¹ Wojtyła, Karol/John Paul II. *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, Catholic Thought from Lublin (New York: P. Lang, 1993): 219-261. See also *Gift and Mystery*, pp. 93-95.

In the *Acting Person* Wojtyła explained that philosophers must do more than erect theories upon theories, meta-theories as we call them today, but rather the philosopher should “face the major issues themselves concerning life, nature, and the existence of the human being ... directly as they present themselves to man” (vii). In opposition to Descartes and modern philosophy, he suggests that action is a better way into anthropology than reflective consciousness. He states that his prime objective is “the understanding of the human person for the sake of the person himself; to respond to that challenge that is posed by the experience of man as well as by the existential problems of man in the contemporary world” (22).

In short, his strategy is to emphasize philosophical anthropology, and use phenomenological methods, in order to offer fresh discovery of the truth of Thomistic philosophy of the human person as a spiritual being with powers of intellect and will, fulfilled by truth and love. He opens a way for appreciation of conscience and the rediscovery of God. In *Redemptor hominis* he proclaims that man is the way of the Church. Thus in *Fides et ratio* he praises modern philosophy for “the great merit of focusing attention upon man”. From this starting-point, human reason with its many questions has developed further its yearning to know more and to know it ever more deeply. §5 The experience of freedom and the search for fulfillment must re-open the question of the truth of the good and the existence of God. In a speech in New Orleans, 1987, John Paul II put together his account of the mutual discovery of the person and God:

Today there exists an increasingly evident need for philosophical reflection concerning the truth about the human person. A metaphysical approach is needed as an antidote to intellectual and moral relativism. But what is required even more is fidelity to the word of God, to ensure that human progress takes into account the entire revealed truth of the eternal act of love in which the universe and especially the human person acquire ultimate meaning. The more one seeks to unravel the mystery of the human person, the more open one becomes to the mystery of transcendence. The more deeply one penetrates the divine mystery, the more one discovers the true greatness and dignity of human beings.

3. *Fides et ratio*, vocation and the crisis of our time

The teaching of Vatican II provided Pope John Paul II with a confident and dynamic agenda for his pontificate. He said that “the Second Vatican Council has been a gift of the Spirit to his Church. For this reason it remains a fundamental event for understanding the Church’s history at this end of

the century ... and it was possible to note how the patrimony of 2,000 years of faith has been preserved in its original authenticity".¹² Thus, two of the passages in *Fides et ratio* which mention vocation refer explicitly to *Gaudium et spes* §22 as providing a key to anthropology and the answer to human vocation or calling. As a model for the vocation of philosophy in faith, John Paul II learns from Christ the true measure of man. In section §13 he cites GS §22 – Christ the Lord “in revealing the mystery of the Father and his love fully reveals man to himself and makes clear his supreme calling”. The context deals with the mystery of human existence or its “irreducibility”, a theme taken up in his early philosophical work. In section §60 he considers this passage from *Gaudium et spes* to be a constant reference point in his teaching and profoundly significant for philosophy: “The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come, Christ the Lord. Christ, the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling”. The searching, the “journey of discovery” must harbor some hope of fulfillment. Thus, “faith comes to meet them offering the concrete possibility of reaching the goal” (§33). We are offered a call to the fullness of truth, which offers a hope for renewal for any particular culture (§71).¹³ The truth is a powerful source of newness and reform.

An abandonment of truth, a despairing or slothful attitude about truth constitutes the spiritual malaise of our time. In his earlier philosophical works, Wojtyła saw the confrontation of materialism and ideology of work as the challenge for our day to be confronted by Christian philosophy and theology. John Paul II later reformulates the account of the crisis of our time as a “crisis of meaning”, §81. The crisis spreads beyond Marxist materialism and western liberalism. The nihilism of the day and the despair over truth runs very deep. It arises from the fragmentation of knowledge (§81); the “wilting” of reason under the weight of infinite tasks and mind-numbing details (§5); the constrictions of technological thinking (§15). This vocation of philosophy for seeking the fullness of truth “is all the more necessary today, because the immense expansion of humanity’s technical capability demands a renewed and sharpened sense of ultimate values. If this technology is not ordered to something greater than a merely utilitarian end, then it could soon prove inhuman and even become potential destroyer of the human race” (§81). The modern aspiration for freedom, for community, and

¹² February 27, 2000.

¹³ The vocation of the human person is ultimately to know and to love God. §107.

for meaning require an authentic philosophy, a philosophy springing from the original vocation, a philosophy consonant with the word of God.

In the final section of *Fides et Ratio*, he says “between the vocation of the Blessed Virgin and the vocation of true philosophy there is a deep harmony” (§108). He considers the life of Mary “a true parable illuminating the reflection contained in these pages”. Mary lost none of her humanity in giving assent to Gabriel’s word; so, too, “when philosophy heeds the summons of the Gospel’s truth its autonomy is in no way impaired”. All the more do its enquiries “rise to their highest expression”. In other words, philosophy needs to embrace faith and find its culmination as philosophy in such an embrace. The life of faith will enhance the excellence of reason, not detract from it. John Paul invokes the Seat of Wisdom in the concluding section of *Fides et Ratio* and he exhorts the reader to philosophize in Mary (“*philosophari in Maria*”, §108).¹⁴ This very rich and suggestive invocation of Mary and the final references to vocation summarize the entire account of vocation of the philosopher in *Fides et ratio*. We must learn to overcome the long-standing separation of faith and reason as well as the awkward attempts to relate them at a distance. Only the unity of faith and life will suffice.

Conclusion

Blessed John Paul II’s new mandate or impetus to the Pontifical Academy of St Thomas (“*Inter Munera Academicarum*” 1999) takes on greater meaning and urgency when we consider the vocation of the philosopher today. With the invocation of Mary in *Fides et ratio*, with his final use of the term vocation, he said: “philosophy is called to offer its rational and critical resources that theology, as the understanding of faith, may be fruitful and creative” §108. Thus in *Inter Munera* Blessed John Paul II expressed his desire to see philosophy and theology serve the pastoral mission of the Pope and the Church. He names Thomas Aquinas the *Doctor humanitatis* because he was ready to affirm the good or value of culture wherever it is to be found. Thomas is a teacher for our time because of his “assertions on the dignity of the human person and the use of his reason” (§4). Wojtyła as a philosopher ceaselessly pondered the question “what is man?” In his encyclical *Re-*

¹⁴ See Ralph McInerney, “Cum Maria Philosophari”, *Crisis* (December 1998); Romanus Cessario, “The Reason for Reason”, *Crisis* (January 1999); and Sr. Prudence Allen, “Mary and the Vocation of Philosophers”, in Hittinger, John. *The Vocation of the Catholic Philosopher: From Maritain to John Paul II*. Washington, D.C.: American Maritain Association: Distributed by the Catholic University of America Press, 2010, pp. 51-79. Originally published in *New Blackfriars*, vol. 90 (Jan 2009): 50-72.

demptor hominis he proclaimed that man is the way of the church. Therefore this designation of St Thomas Aquinas as doctor of humanity indicates his esteem and preference for the philosophy of St Thomas in the renewed philosophy of our day. The philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas seeks out the truth about the human person, the soul, the true human good, and the relationship to the divine. The Academy as a forum for the study of St Thomas has pride of place in the new evangelization.

I will end with a curious formulation about the achievement of St Thomas made by Pope Paul VI and cited with approval by Blessed John Paul II in *Fides et ratio* §43. In Thomas Aquinas we find a harmony of faith and reason and a salutary understanding of nature and grace. But perhaps even more important for the new evangelization we find this statement:

Without doubt, Thomas possessed supremely the courage of the truth, a freedom of spirit in confronting new problems, the intellectual honesty of those who allow Christianity to be contaminated neither by secular philosophy nor by a prejudiced rejection of it. He passed therefore into the history of Christian thought as a pioneer of the new path of philosophy and universal culture. The key point and almost the kernel of the solution which, with all the brilliance of his prophetic intuition, he gave to the new encounter of faith and reason was a reconciliation between the secularity of the world and the radicality of the Gospel, thus avoiding the unnatural tendency to negate the world and its values while at the same time keeping faith with the supreme and inexorable demands of the supernatural order.¹⁵

Aquinas, in other words, embodies the attitude and principles needed for the sanctification of the world as envisioned by Vatican II. Philosophers must also respond to the universal call to holiness and help to form the laity in their proper apostolate, seeking the guidance of St Thomas Aquinas, *Doctor humanitatis*.

¹⁵ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Lumen Ecclesiae* (20 November 1974), 8: AAS 66 (1974), 680. "Maxima profecto fuerunt S. Thomae et audacia in veritate quaerenda, et spiritus libertas in novis tractandis quaestionibus, et illa mentis probitas, eorum propria, qui, dum nullo modo patiuntur christianam veritatem contaminari profana philosophia, hanc tamen a priori minime respuunt. Quare, in christianae doctrinae historia eius nomen in numerum refertur praecursorum, quibus novus philosophiae atque scientiae universalis cursus debetur. Caput autem et quasi cardo doctrinae, qua ipse, ut summa et quasi prophetica ingenii scie praeditus erat, quaestionem dissolvit de novis mutuis relationibus inter rationem et fidem, in eo positum est, quod mundi *saecolaritatem* cum arduis ac severis Evangelii postulatis composuit; atque hoc modo sese subduxit ab inclinatione, naturae aliena, ad mundum eiusque bona contemnenda, neque tamen descivit a supremis et indeclinabilibus principiis supernaturalis ordinis".

EN TORNO A LA FILOSOFÍA COMO "ANCILLA FIDEI" SEGÚN JUAN PABLO II

□ PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ

La *mía* es una palabra a propósito de la relación entre teología y filosofía en el magisterio del beato Juan Pablo II. Parto de la positiva insistencia con que el Santo Padre, en su encíclica *Fides et Ratio*, afirma que la reflexión teológica, precisamente porque recurre a la filosofía y se sirve de conceptos y argumentos filosóficos, debe respetar la autonomía de la filosofía, que proporciona a la teología la posibilidad de verificar la inteligibilidad y la verdad universal de sus propias aserciones.

La relectura de *Fides et Ratio* con ocasión de nuestra Plenaria, me ha traído a la mente otro discurso de Juan Pablo II, que es tal vez su primer gran documento sobre Santo Tomás de Aquino. Me refiero – y muchos de Vds. lo recordarán – al discurso que, al año siguiente de su elección, pronunció el Papa Wojtyła en el *Angelicum* con ocasión del Centenario de la Enc. *Aeterni Patris* del Papa León XIII (17-XI-1979).

He aquí las palabras de Juan Pablo II que incitan mi reflexión:

La conquista de la verdad natural, que tiene su fuente suprema en Dios Creador, como la verdad divina la tiene en Dios Revelador, ha hecho a la filosofía del Angélico sumamente idónea para ser la *ancilla fidei*, sin humillarse a sí misma, y sin restringir sus campos de investigación, sino al contrario, adquiriendo desarrollos inimaginables por la sola razón humana.¹

Es una fórmula muy poco usual la que emplea aquí el Santo Padre: la filosofía sería no la *ancilla theologiae*, según la expresión consagrada, sino la *ancilla fidei*, la servidora de la fe.

La historia testifica que la fórmula *ancilla theologiae*, aplicada a la filosofía, se ha prestado a numerosos equívocos. Parecía por su formulación poner en entredicho el carácter autónomo, incluso sapiencial, de la actividad de la razón humana cuando investiga dentro de su propio horizonte. Incluso hay filósofos cristianos, plenamente conscientes del servicio connatural que la

¹ Discurso en la Pontificia Universidad de Santo Tomás de Aquino, 17-XI-1979. Vid. La encíclica "Aeterni Patris", de León XIII, en el magisterio de Juan Pablo II, en *Scripta Theologica* 12 (1980/3) 719-759.

Doctor Communis

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