

**FIDES ET RATIO AND JOHN PAUL'S CALL TO CATHOLIC PHILOSOPHERS:  
ORTHODOXY AND/OR THE UNITY OF TRUTH**

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**1. Introduction**

John Paul II, often referred to as “the philosopher Pope,” made it quite clear throughout his papacy that philosophy—far from being a detriment to faith and theology—was an integral part of the Catholic Church’s Tradition, and that it remains an important tool for carrying out the mission of the Church as we move into the third millennium. For the Catholic Church, faith and reason have always been compatible. In *Fides et Ratio*, the late Holy Father chose to emphasize and expound upon this theme. As he explains in the “Introduction” to this letter:

In my Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, I drew attention to “certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine which, in the present circumstances, risk being distorted or denied.” In the present Letter, I wish to pursue that reflection by concentrating on the theme of truth itself and on its foundation in relation to faith.... 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. This is why I have felt both the need and the duty to address this theme so that, on the threshold of the third millennium of the Christian era, humanity may come to a clearer sense of the great resources with which it has been endowed and may commit itself with renewed courage to implement the plan of salvation of which its history is part (#6).<sup>1</sup>

And so, in *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II carefully articulates the importance of reason within the faith life of the Christian, warning of the danger of separating faith from reason and pitting the two against each other. He

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<sup>1</sup> The translation used throughout is taken from the Vatican website at [http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0216/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0216/_INDEX.HTM).

also discusses the dual and complementary roles of theology and philosophy within the Tradition of the Church.

It is worth noting that in this discussion of faith and reason, theology and philosophy, John Paul II holds up St. Thomas Aquinas as a special model and example for Catholics. He writes that:

...Thomas had the great merit of giving pride of place to the harmony which exists between faith and reason. Both the light of reason and the light of faith come from God, he argued; hence there can be no contradiction between them.... More radically, Thomas recognized that nature, philosophy's proper concern, could contribute to the understanding of divine Revelation. Faith therefore has no fear of reason, but seeks it out and has trust in it.... Although he made much of the supernatural character of faith, the Angelic Doctor did not overlook the importance of its reasonableness; indeed he was able to plumb the depths and explain the meaning of this reasonableness. Faith is in a sense an "exercise of thought"; and human reason is neither annulled nor debased in assenting to the contents of faith, which are in any case attained by way of free and informed choice (#43).

Now John Paul II is quick to point out that in recommending St. Thomas as a model, neither he nor the Church as a whole intends to restrict the search for truth to any one particular philosophical approach or system. In keeping with the tradition of his predecessors, John Paul II notes that "The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others" (#49).

This last quotation, however, raises some confusion over the whole point of this particular encyclical. If the Church has no "official" philosophy, then why write a letter on the subject? If the letter is not meant to "canonize" a particular philosophical approach, then what is its purpose? Attempting to discuss the full meaning of *Fides et Ratio* is simply beyond the scope of one paper. However, I want to focus in on one of the central points of the larger message of the letter: the role of philosophy within the Catholic Tradition. Of special importance will be John Paul II's "challenge" or "call" to philosophers in *Fides et Ratio* to help people "come to a unified and organic vision of knowledge" (#85). This call is summarized in the conclusion of the letter:

I appeal also to philosophers, and to all teachers of philosophy, asking them to have the courage to recover, in the flow of an enduringly valid philosophical tradition, the range of 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. Then they will be able to formulate the genuine ethics which humanity needs so urgently at this particular time (#106).

In sum, John Paul II, with lament over the current state of philosophy in the contemporary world, uses *Fides et Ratio* in part to urge philosophers to renew the very task of philosophy itself—the search for truth and wisdom—and to do so in earnest and without fear!

But what are the theoretical and the practical implications of John Paul II's "call," specifically for one who identifies her or himself as a "Catholic philosopher"? On the one hand, the Catholic philosopher as a "philosopher" must confront the contemporary world in which Christian philosophers as a whole are often subjected to criticism because of their religious background, given our pluralistic culture. Although the concept of "pluralism" ought to open the door for philosophers of all backgrounds, in practice it is more often than not used in an exclusionary fashion to marginalize the religious voice, even when that voice is not attempting to be explicitly religious. On the other hand, the Catholic philosopher as a "Catholic" must be mindful of the demands of her or his faith. The reality of religious orthodoxy seems, at times, to put limits upon the philosophical quest. There is much concern within the Church regarding orthodoxy, including concerns from Catholic philosophers themselves over what can actually be spoken or written under the title of "Catholic." Working under both sets of pressures is difficult, to be sure. But, because of his fidelity to the unity of truth, John Paul II is confident that philosophy and the Christian faith are, and always will be, compatible: "philosophy must obey its own rules and be based upon its own principles; truth, however, can only be one. The content of Revelation can never debase the discoveries and legitimate autonomy of reason" (#79).

And so, in reflecting upon John Paul II's call to Catholic philosophers and attempting to come to an understanding of the theoretical and practical implications of that call, three themes from *Fides et Ratio* will be examined. First, I will examine what John Paul II says in the letter about philosophy in and of itself. I will then explore what the Pope says about the interaction between philosophy and theology. And finally, I will reflect upon the implications of the first two points for the Catholic philosopher, especially in light of the tension between religious orthodoxy and the unity of truth. In examining these issues, I will argue that the Church is asking Catholic philosophers to continue to engage in genuine philosophical enquiry with confidence in the unity of truth. Concerns for orthodoxy must not be ignored, but the defense of the faith belongs primarily to the Church as a whole, and more specifically to the Magisterium working within the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus, part of the message of *Fides et Ratio* is that Catholic philosophers need to take assurance that, if we do our work well, we can only promote truth.

## 2. Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition

Whereas the overall discussion of *Fides et Ratio* is cast under the heading of faith and "reason," John Paul II focuses specifically on the discipline of philosophy, rather than other ways of human knowing, and its special function in the search for truth. Thus, in the "Introduction," he notes that:

Men and women have at their disposal an array of resources for generating greater knowledge of truth so that their lives may be ever more human. Among these is philosophy, which is directly concerned with asking the question of life's meaning and sketching an answer to it. Philosophy emerges, then, as one of the noblest of human tasks. According to its Greek etymology, the term philosophy means "love of wisdom." Born and nurtured when the human being first asked questions about the reason for things and their purpose, philosophy shows in different modes and forms that the desire for truth is part of human nature itself (#3).

With this focus upon truth—indeed, upon ultimate truth—philosophy can clearly stand in harmony with faith, and, therefore, philosophy is in harmony with theology as well. This is one of the unique aspects of

Catholic Christianity. "Faith" and "Reason" are not at odds with one another, but rather are intimate allies in the search for truth. Thus, John Paul II specifically rejects both rationalism and fideism as extreme and incomplete views, especially within the Church's theology. Instead, he emphasizes that:

On her part, the Church cannot but set great value upon reason's drive to attain goals which render people's lives ever more worthy. She sees in philosophy the way to come to know fundamental truths about human life. At the same time, the Church considers philosophy an indispensable help for a deeper understanding of faith and for communicating the truth of the Gospel to those who do not yet know it (#5).

Throughout the letter, the late Pope continuously emphasizes the compatibility of faith and reason, and more specifically philosophy's contribution to helping the believer reflect upon faith.

However, even though philosophy can complement faith, it is in itself an autonomous and independent discipline. John Paul II is quite clear about this, pointing out 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 (#49).

None of this is meant to imply that philosophy represents a perfect human activity that is immune to error—far from it. The philosopher, Catholic or other, must always maintain a certain humility in exercising the autonomy of her or his discipline, given the natural limitations of human reason.

This is also why the Church, through the teaching authority of the Magisterium, intervenes at times in philosophical matters. John Paul II explains:

...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 (#49).

Thus, the Church's stance is not to become the font of the one, true philosophy, but it rather safeguards the faith from the implications of philosophical errors. In this light, John Paul II emphasizes that when the Church intervenes in philosophical matters, its actions should not be viewed as punitive or negative, but rather as "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" (#50), which is "intended above all to prompt, promote and encourage philosophical enquiry" (#51).

Now there will be some who will scoff at the late Holy Father's sentiments that all the Church wants to do is promote open philosophical enquiry, but the teaching of the Church here in *Fides et Ratio* is clear: philosophy is the independent and autonomous human search for truth, and it should remain so for the common good of humanity! Perhaps the true spirit of John Paul II's message is best captured in his bold exhortation to philosophers in Chapter V of his letter:

...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 (#56).

These are not the words of a person who wants to control and dominate philosophy—indeed, they are quite the opposite. John Paul II

calls philosophers of every background to philosophize, and to do so with all of their intellectual might!

### 3. The Interaction Between Philosophy and Theology

As his discussion in *Fides et Ratio* unfolds, John Paul II turns to the specific question of the relationship between philosophy and theology. Right from the outset, the Pope is clear that within the Catholic Tradition, theology and philosophy are interconnected. His words here are telling:

As a reflective and scientific elaboration of the understanding of God's word in the light of faith, theology for its part must relate, in some of its procedures and in the performance of its specific tasks, to the philosophies which have been developed through the ages. I have no wish to direct theologians to particular methods, since that is not the competence of the Magisterium. I wish instead to recall some specific tasks of theology which, by the very nature of the revealed word, demand recourse to philosophical enquiry (#64).

In this light, John Paul II identifies three areas of theological discourse that depend upon the contributions of philosophical enquiry.

First, there is dogmatic theology. The Pope emphatically states that, "Without philosophy's contribution, it would in fact be impossible to discuss theological issues such as, for example, the use of language to speak about God, the personal relations within the Trinity, God's creative activity in the world, the relationship between God and man, or Christ's identity as true God and true man" (#66).

Second, fundamental theology, which seeks to give an account of the faith, also makes use of philosophy. As John Paul II explains:

...the First Vatican Council pointed to the existence of truths which are naturally, and thus philosophically, knowable; and an acceptance of God's Revelation necessarily presupposes knowledge of these truths. In studying Revelation and its credibility, as well as the corresponding act of faith, fundamental theology should show how, in the light of the knowledge conferred by faith, there emerge certain truths which reason, from its own independent enquiry, already perceives. Revelation

endows these truths with their fullest meaning, directing them towards the richness of the revealed mystery in which they find their ultimate purpose (#67).

Finally, there is moral theology. As it seeks to help believers apply the basic principles of Christian morality to "the particular circumstances of individual and communal life, Christians must be able fully to engage their conscience and the power of their reason. In other words, moral theology requires a sound philosophical vision of human nature and society, as well as of the general principles of ethical decision-making" (#68).

In the end, John Paul II illustrates the interaction between theology and philosophy with the concept of a circle:

In the light of these considerations, the relationship between theology and philosophy is best construed as a circle. Theology's source and starting-point must always be the word of God revealed in history, while its final goal will be an understanding of that word which increases with each passing generation. Yet, since God's word is Truth (cf. Jn 17:17), the human search for truth—philosophy, pursued in keeping with its own rules—can only help to understand God's word better. It is not just a question of theological discourse using this or that concept or element of a philosophical construct; what matters most is that the believer's reason use its powers of reflection in the search for truth which moves from the word of God towards a better understanding of it. It is as if, moving between the twin poles of God's word and a better understanding of it, reason is offered guidance and is warned against paths which would lead it to stray from revealed Truth and to stray in the end from the truth pure and simple. Instead, reason is stirred to explore paths which of itself it would not even have suspected it could take. This circular relationship with the word of God leaves philosophy enriched, because reason discovers new and unsuspected horizons (#73).

In this way of thinking, philosophy and theology can be affirmed as mutually compatible and mutually supportive, without taking anything away from the autonomy of philosophy as an independent human discipline, and without degrading the lofty nature of theology. John



Paul II is emphatic on this point. Philosophy is not perfect; it never has been and never will be. Philosophy is limited, because the human beings that engage in it are limited. But human beings are capable of attaining truth, at least in some measure, and careful, philosophical enquiry is an indispensable tool in the search for truth, including the theological search of the Church.

#### 4. The Three Stances of Philosophy

Towards the end of his discussion of the interaction between philosophy and theology, John Paul II suggests that "...from this brief sketch of the history of the relationship between faith and philosophy, one can distinguish different stances of philosophy with regard to Christian faith" (#75). He goes on to identify three such "stances," each of which is worthwhile to reflect upon in terms of what *Fides et Ratio* asks of the Catholic philosopher.

First, John Paul II recognizes a philosophical approach that stands completely outside of faith and revelation. What is worth noting is that whereas he points out the limitations of what we might call a "purely" rational approach to philosophy, John Paul II still extols such a philosophical approach: "We see here philosophy's valid aspiration to be an autonomous enterprise, obeying its own rules and employing the powers of reason alone. Although seriously handicapped by the inherent weakness of human reason, this aspiration should be supported and strengthened. As a search for truth within the natural order, the enterprise of philosophy is always open—at least implicitly—to the supernatural" (#75). Once again, we find the Pope recognizing and supporting the autonomous nature of philosophical inquiry for its own sake. Philosophy is an important human endeavor, even outside the specific realm of faith.

The second "stance" involves the concept of a specifically "Christian" philosophy, still a much debated issue today. For his part, John Paul II argues that there can indeed be such an endeavor. His understanding, however, bears careful consideration. First, it is once again pointed out that in discussing a "Christian" philosophy, this "...in no way intends to suggest that there is an official philosophy of the Church, since the faith as such is not a philosophy" (#76). Nonetheless, John Paul II states that there can be a genuine "...Christian way of philosophizing, a philosophical speculation conceived in dynamic

union with faith" (ibid). But what would such a "Christian" philosophy entail? As he supports his position here, John Paul II argues that "Christian" philosophy:

...does not therefore refer simply to a philosophy developed by Christian philosophers who have striven in their research not to contradict the faith. The term Christian philosophy includes those important developments of philosophical thinking which would not have happened without the direct or indirect contribution of Christian faith (#76).

Yet, lest some fear that this notion of "Christian" philosophy blurs the line between philosophy and theology, John Paul II adds that:

In speculating on these questions, philosophers have not become theologians, since they have not sought to understand and expound the truths of faith on the basis of Revelation. They have continued working on their own terrain and with their own purely rational method, yet extending their research to new aspects of truth. It could be said that a good part of modern and contemporary philosophy would not exist without this stimulus of the word of God (#76).

In short, the "Christianity" of the "Christian" philosopher opens reason to new areas of thought and new realms of action by lifting the intellect beyond physical reality, all the while remaining within the proper sphere of philosophical enquiry.

Finally, John Paul II discusses a third and final "stance" of philosophy in regards to Christian faith, which he identifies as, "when theology itself calls upon it" (#77). In this paragraph, a clearer vision of the proper role of philosophy within the Church, both in its past and for its future, is put forth. First, John Paul II reaffirms much of what the previous chapters of the encyclical have been putting into place. He notes that:

Theology in fact has always needed and still needs philosophy's contribution. As a work of critical reason in the light of faith, theology presupposes and requires in all its research a reason formed and educated to concept and argument. Moreover, theology needs philosophy as a partner in dialogue in order to confirm the intelligibility and universal

truth of its claims. It was not by accident that the Fathers of the Church and the Medieval theologians adopted non-Christian philosophies. This historical fact confirms the value of philosophy's autonomy, which remains unimpaired when theology calls upon it; but it shows as well the profound transformations which philosophy itself must undergo (ibid).

In reading the above passage, some might assume that the late Holy Father is about to lower the boom on philosophy by harkening back to the Patristic and Medieval notions that philosophy is nothing more than the "handmaiden of theology"—all of the fine rhetoric about the autonomy of philosophy in the earlier pages of the letter, notwithstanding. Any that might think this would, however, be wrong. As John Paul II goes on to explain:

It was because of its noble and indispensable contribution that, from the Patristic period onwards, philosophy was called the *ancilla theologiae*. The title was not intended to indicate philosophy's servile submission or purely functional role with regard to theology. Rather, it was used in the sense in which Aristotle had spoken of the experimental sciences as "ancillary" to "prima philosophia". The term can scarcely be used today, given the principle of autonomy to which we have referred, but it has served throughout history to indicate the necessity of the link between the two sciences and the impossibility of their separation (#77).

Now, while some may quibble over his explanation of the attitude towards philosophy in the Church's past, the message for the future could not be clearer. Taking the Pope at his word, *Fides et Ratio* emphatically reminds us of the autonomy of philosophy, even in light of the role that it can—and must—provide to theology.

##### 5. The Unity of Truth and Orthodoxy

Thus far, I have quoted extensively from John Paul II's encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio*, to illustrate what he has set forth as the Catholic Church's stance towards philosophy, and its proper role within the Tradition of the Church, as well as the continued need of philosophical enquiry for the future evangelization of the Church in the third millennium. Even still, I have only scratched the surface of the late

Holy Father's message in *Fides et Ratio*. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to read John Paul II's own words, given that many viewed him and his papacy as anything but "open-minded." Even during his last days, and throughout his funeral services, the media would constantly refer to his "traditional" ways, his "ultra-conservative" policies, his "unbending control" of the bishops and cardinals—all, of course, in polite and deferential tones. I would submit that such attitudes towards John Paul II's papacy are unfair and misguided, largely coming from a lack of understanding of the Catholic Tradition. His writings tell the real story. The truth is that John Paul II loved the truth and encouraged every man and woman to pursue it without fear! In fact, the easier path would probably have been to use *Fides et Ratio* to go ahead and "canonize" whatever the Pope held to be the one, true philosophy and be done with it. Such a move has often been the temptation down through the ages, and we have seen countless other institutions and governments attempt to codify thought, shut down free enquiry, and establish a very narrow vision of what is perceived at the time as *the* "truth." Yet, the Church has not made such a move in its history, although it often speaks to the errors of various philosophies and ideologies. John Paul II did not make such a move in his papacy either. But why not? Is it simply that the Church cannot make up its mind? Has the Holy Spirit failed the Church in this one area?

To address these questions, and to fully understand the "openness" of the Church here with its resistance towards "canonizing" one particular philosophy for all believers, one must recall the Catholic Tradition's perpetual belief and confidence in the unity of truth. This is the ultimate foundation upon which the wisdom of the Church in all of its teachings is based, and it is clearly at work in *Fides et Ratio*. To begin with, John Paul II recognizes that, "The unity of truth is a fundamental premise of human reasoning, as the principle of non-contradiction makes clear" (#34). But saying that truth is one does not imply that there is only one path to the truth: this is a common mistake that must always be corrected. For his part, John Paul II explains instead that "There are many paths which lead to truth, but since Christian truth has a salvific value, any one of these paths may be taken, as long as it leads to the final goal, that is to the Revelation of Jesus Christ" (#38). Thus, any one of the paths to truth may be taken, which leaves

philosophical enquiry open. In fact, philosophical enquiry must remain open, given the limitations of human reason:

...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 (#51).

No one philosophy, and no one philosopher as a "philosopher," will ever be able to attain the totality of truth.

In sum, God is Truth. Thus, the search for truth through either theology or philosophy will always lead to the same end, God (even when the seeker is unaware of the real Truth she or he is seeking!). Confidence in the unity of truth is what grounds the Church's openness to philosophy. Confidence in the unity of truth is also what grounds John Paul II's personal urging towards philosophers to recover philosophy's "original vocation" (#6) and "not to set themselves goals that are too modest in their philosophizing" (#56).

But what about maintaining Catholic orthodoxy? What of the dangers of a particular philosophical argument, or even a whole philosophical system, contradicting the faith? In recognizing the autonomy of philosophy, has John Paul II opened the door to relativism? After all, if there are many paths to truth, does this mean all paths (i.e. all philosophical approaches) are on an equal par with one another? Is everyone free to choose what works best for him or herself? Careful reading of *Fides et Ratio* makes it clear that the late Holy Father was not developing a relativistic attitude. As noted earlier, this is where the intervention of the Magisterium comes into play:

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. 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 judgment 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 (#50).

It is the Church, through her proper teaching authority, guided by the Holy Spirit, that is the determinant and defender of orthodoxy. And even for the Church, John Paul II admits this is a daunting task:

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 (#51).

We must keep these points in mind, then, when we consider the role of a Catholic philosopher. It is the Church as a whole that clarifies what falls outside of Catholic orthodoxy.

What I find particularly interesting here, however, is that throughout all of the discussion regarding the intervention of the Magisterium in philosophical matters, nowhere does John Paul II withdraw his stance regarding the autonomy of philosophy or alter his position that philosophy is integral to the work and mission of the Church. Rather, he emphasizes the positive role that even erroneous philosophical positions have made in developing the understanding of the Christian faith and the official teachings of the Church throughout its Tradition. Citing the Dogmatic Constitution from the First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, John Paul II states that:

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 (#53).

There it is—truth cannot contradict the truth! Thus, we might say that for one who recognizes the unity of truth, the philosophical search for truth—when done openly, honestly, and sincerely—becomes consonant with Catholic orthodoxy.

#### 6. Conclusion: *Fides et Ratio* and the Catholic Philosopher

In the end, *Fides et Ratio* has much to say to many different groups of people. I have focused on but one group, Catholic philosophers. I believe that, in this letter, John Paul II extols the beauty and dignity of our discipline both for itself and for its role within the mission and teaching of the Church. At the same time, John Paul II extols the religious faith of Catholic philosophers as well. In so doing, he affirms that a “Catholic philosopher” is not a walking paradox or a living contradiction for those inside as well as outside of the Church. As I reflect upon what all of this means for myself as a Catholic philosopher, two statements from *Fides et Ratio* keep coming back to me, washing over my thoughts.

First, there is John Paul II's urging all philosophers:

...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 (#56).

Even in the midst of discussing the role of the Magisterium in seeking to defend and preserve the truth of the Catholic faith from philosophical errors, John Paul II turns to the philosopher and says, “philosophize!” His confidence in the unity of truth and faith in the Holy Spirit prompt his boldness. As he urged from the beginning of his papacy: be not afraid! Nor does the Pope simply call for renewing the old philosophical arguments. Rather, he explicitly calls for the boldness to forge new enquiries and new arguments. Philosophers of every ilk ought to be asking themselves, “Have I become complacent in my

philosophy?," "Do I need to be awoken from my dogmatic slumbers?," and, "What more can I do, what new enquiries can I begin?"

I believe the above quote (#56) provides more than enough food for thought for any philosopher, and we could justly stop right here to ponder the implications of it alone. However, the second quote that keeps coming back to me becomes a lens that intensifies John Paul II's specific "call" to Catholic philosophers. I am thinking of the passage in which he addresses the question of Christian philosophy. In his discussion, John Paul II notes that the concept of Christian philosophy "...does not therefore refer simply to a philosophy developed by Christian philosophers who have striven in their research not to contradict the faith" (#76). Now I do not believe that any philosopher that claimed to be Catholic, and who was a committed believer, would ever knowingly want to contradict her or his faith or the official teaching of the Church. But John Paul II, I believe, is pointing out that if one's primary standard as a Catholic doing philosophy is simply to avoid anything that might appear to be unorthodox, then one is not engaging in the fullness of philosophical enquiry. The encyclical explicitly states that philosophy, including Christian philosophy, ought not to be constrained by such limits. What is more, Catholic philosophers who believe that this is all their philosophy should do ought not to project the same demands upon other Catholic philosophers who are attempting to forge new paths towards the truth. If we limit our philosophical work too much in this regard, the ability of the Church as a whole to contribute to the moral growth of our culture will be severely hampered. Thus, towards the end of his letter, John Paul II specifically exhorts Catholic philosophers, noting that:

Philosophical thought is often the only ground for understanding and dialogue with those who do not share our faith. The current ferment in philosophy demands of believing philosophers an attentive and competent commitment, able to discern the expectations, the points of openness and the key issues of this historical moment. Reflecting in the light of reason and in keeping with its rules, and guided always by the deeper understanding given them by the word of God, Christian philosophers can develop a reflection which will be both comprehensible and appealing to those who do not yet grasp the full truth which divine Revelation declares. Such a ground for



understanding and dialogue is all the more vital nowadays, since the most pressing issues facing humanity—ecology, peace and the co-existence of different races and cultures, for instance—may possibly find a solution if there is a clear and honest collaboration between Christians and the followers of other religions and all those who, while not sharing a religious belief, have at heart the renewal of humanity (#104).

In the end, the Church asks much of Catholic philosophers, both as “philosophers” and as “Catholics.” This is because, within the Catholic Tradition, philosophy is not merely an esoteric sideline, but rather it is an integral part of the work of the Church in breaking open the Wisdom of God for both believers and non-believers alike. Nor must we forget that, in doing this work, the Church does not ask the Catholic philosopher to become a theologian. *Fides et Ratio* tells us that the Church needs both theology and philosophy. Now, some Catholic philosophers will make a much closer use of theology in their efforts than others, and such approaches are perfectly legitimate. But equally important are Catholic philosophers whose work is much less explicitly religious. All such efforts are needed in metaphysics, natural theology, philosophy of mind, bioethics, aesthetics, philosophy of the human person, and so on. Catholic philosophers need to be supportive of each other in all of these various works, even ones that fall outside of our own particular preferences for how philosophy ought to be done in general, and more specifically as members of the Catholic Church. As John Paul II reminds us in *Fides et Ratio*: “It must not be forgotten that reason too needs to be sustained in all its searching by trusting dialogue and sincere friendship. A climate of suspicion and distrust, which can beset speculative research, ignores the teaching of the ancient philosophers, who proposed friendship as one of the most appropriate contexts for sound philosophical enquiry” (#33). I do not take this to mean that we ought to be soft on each other in our philosophical exchanges—that would not really be of much help to the Church as it faces critics within society. However, by continuing to support each other in our work, and by challenging each other to argue well and to argue wisely, Catholic philosophers can answer John Paul II’s “call” in *Fides et Ratio*. For my part, I believe that it is a privilege to engage in this role as part of the saving mission of the Church. In this effort, we must not be afraid.

**PART IV**

**CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES**