

## *A Not Uncritical Harmony*

-by Kenneth L. Schmitz

John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* reiterates in a new and fresh way the harmony of faith and reason. The dominant tradition of Catholic thought is one that sees this harmony, but the tradition is not uncritical. Throughout the history of the Church, there have been thinkers wary of reason. The thought of Karol Wojtyla, both before and during his papacy, has looked to a focus on the human person as a way to reconcile faith and reason.

The thirteenth encyclical of John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, might have been entitled "The Harmony of Faith and Reason." It reiterates in a new and fresh way the dominant strain in Roman Catholicism. We find the clearest and earliest affirmation of that strain in the second century writings of Justin Martyr, who wrote of two rivers, one flowing through Athens and the other through Jerusalem, but both from the same source (*Fides et Ratio*, sec. 38). Again, the Church Councils of the fourth and fifth centuries were bold in their use of Greek philosophical concepts in the service of theology. The present encyclical reaches back even further. After a century and more of brilliant Protestant exegesis which stressed the prophetic element in Christianity and Judaism, the present encyclical, drawing upon the past fifty years of renewed Catholic biblical exegesis, stresses the harmony between the covenantal inspiration of the Wisdom books and the philosophical ideas of Hellenism (sec. 16-21).

Nevertheless, although the tradition of the harmony between faith and reason is, undoubtedly, the dominant tradition in Roman Catholicism, it is by no means an uncritical one. Indeed, counter-positions can be found along the two-thousand year way. Tertullian--who, incidentally, did not say that faith was absurd, but rather that it was inconvenient or out of tune with ordinary reason (*Credo qui ineptum*, not *absurdum*)--gives expression to this lesser more negative tradition with its wariness in the face of the claims of reason. Then, too, in the eleventh century Peter Damian speaks in a similar vein, saying that if Christ had meant to save mankind through philosophers he would not have sent simple fishermen. Indeed, of more moment still are the condemnations issued by the Bishop of Paris in 1270 and 1277. They include several propositions imputed to St. Thomas Aquinas. These condemnations had the effect of withdrawing confidence in reason on the part of major theologians. Matthew Cardinal of Aquasparta, following the Latin Avicennian doctrine of

essences or quiddities, insisted that philosophy dealt only with abstract essences or ideas, and that, if one were to deal with the real world of existence, he would have to resort to theology. This position reappeared in the seventeenth century with the idealist Père Malebranche. Giving a religious turn to the Cartesian doubt, Malebranche held that the only surety that the world actually existed was to be found in the book of *Genesis*, for the world must exist since God had created it. Bishop Berkeley visited Malebranche and showed him that *Genesis* could be read allegorically. Malebranche died shortly after the visit, thus perpetrating (said a wag) the first murder by metaphysics.

This negative counter-position within Catholicism rears its head ever so often. At the end of the eighteenth century, there arose the position of fideism which attributed everything important to faith rather than to reason. In a famous incident, one of its proponents (Bautain), upon being called to Rome for correction, was greeted by the reigning pope with the words: "My dear Bautain, you have erred by having too much faith." No doubt these recurrent attacks upon reason are in response to the fear that reason has overstated its claims.

There is no such fear in the present encyclical which joins with the dominant position of the harmony between faith and reason. This harmony has been stabilized, at least since the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* in 1879, for it drew Catholics back towards the confidence in reason exhibited by the thirteenth century doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas. He labored to install the newly recovered works of Aristotle within a fully Christian context. This earned him the rebuke that he was so dedicated to turning Aristotle into a Christian that he was only turning himself into a heretic. It seems to me, however, that the harmony of faith and reason has remained the dominant tradition within Catholicism not because of the recovery of Aristotle, but rather the reverse, that the recovery of Aristotle within the Christian context was brought about by the attraction he held for those already convinced of the harmony of faith and reason.

Nevertheless, the counter-position of wariness and even of distrust has served and continues to serve a significant purpose within Catholicism, for it nuances the prevalent harmony and issues cautionary signs against an excessive rationalism. It increases the sense of the delicate tension characteristic of the relation between reason and faith. A careful reading shows that the conception of reason operative in the present encyclical is not just any conception of reason, but a very determinate one.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the basis for the harmony is to be found, above all, in the understanding of the nature of faith as well as in the conception of reason.

As with law, so too, with faith: St. Thomas held faith to be an affair of the mind, in which the knower assents to what is credible in the revelation and that calls for a faith-response. That credence, however, is not identical with the mathematical certitude so prized and sought for by Descartes.<sup>2</sup> It is an implicit theme in the encyclical that the modern search for epistemic certitude is too

abstract and too minimalist to deal with the deeper issues of human life; but, even more, that the modern epistemic search for certitude has failed even on its own grounds.<sup>3</sup> This has in turn given rise to an atmosphere of despair in reason's conduct of its own affairs. We are presented, then, with the irony of the leader of a faith-group calling upon the practitioners of reason to have more courage. Indeed, there are signs that reason has lost its way and must seek out a rebirth in a deeper, more metaphysical soil.

The truth of the claim of faith engages not simply the mind but the whole person. It does this not without risk. For faith contains a truth that tests and engages the whole human person. It is a truth that calls for commitment, for a movement of the will in acknowledging the credibility of faith-claims. In the words of the French Catholic philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, it calls us to lend credit to the reality to which revelation gives expression, to lend credit to what is creditable.

There can be no doubt, then, that the present encyclical calls upon us to give fresh reflection to the very nature of reason and rational knowledge. In this invitation, John Paul II's long standing personalist philosophy plays a significant role. Throughout his pre-papal days, he had already thought through the basic philosophical issues of truth and freedom in personalist terms, converting them into the coinage of the human person. To illustrate: In the *Acting Person* he remarks that we are not free because we have a will, i.e., we must not confine freedom to a specific power of choice within our make-up; rather, we have a will because we as persons are free, i.e., the will is the way in which we as persons discharge the possibility of our free being through deliberation, decision, choice and commitment. The very rootage of our freedom, its true nature, is to be found, not in a specific human power, capability or psychological mechanism, but in our very humanity itself.

A similar translocation occurs with regard to the nature of knowledge. Knowledge (the most prevalent Latin term is *cognitio*) is not simply an affair of the mind, closed in on its own formality; it is rather the encounter of the whole person with the indwelling intelligibility of itself, others and things. This is a radical, concrete approach to knowledge.

The approach is further developed by the interplay of three terms in the encyclical. In Latin the terms are: *cognitio* or cognition, *fiducia* or trust, and *credere* or belief. Here we are not well served by the English translation, which renders *fiducia* or trust as belief. This mistranslation pulls the understanding of knowledge back within the confines of the Cartesian solitary search for certitude and the excessively critical use of reason that is so characteristic of today's academies, media and society. Paul Ricoeur has referred to this attitude as the hermeneutic of suspicion. Such a reduction of trust to belief further encloses the understanding of knowledge within the individualism of the Enlightenment, which had restricted knowledge to the acquisition of evidence

and its verification by an individual. Whereas belief can be construed as merely private, trust is a relational term.

And so this isolationism, the encyclical argues, is not the way in which we arrive at most of what we know. I know Australia exists, even though I have never seen it; and this is the way in which we acquire most of our knowledge. For knowledge contains within itself a basic aspect of trust, developed in the medium of a human faith. This makes the role of criticism indispensable, but it does not make it primary as it so often is in our present excessively critical temper. Rather, criticism is a sifting process based upon and subordinate to the credibility already encountered in knowledge.

Beliefs are usually thought of as mental entities in the possession of an individual knower, so that the whole relational character of knowledge is lost in the English mistranslation. Now, the recovery of the relational character of knowledge is one of the most important philosophical achievements of the present century. Indeed, knowledge was previously thought of during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries pretty much in terms of property, as ideas possessed by the individual mind which was viewed as their owner. It was left to Kant to insist upon the relational character of knowledge, so that knowledge could best be described as the relation between a knower and a known, even though knowledge was thought to reach only phenomena.

At the turn of this century, phenomenology revitalized this relational sense which had never been entirely lost in the scholastic schools. It is not surprising, then, that this pope, who is a practitioner of phenomenology with its insistence upon the relational character of knowledge, breaks through this earlier individualism to consider knowledge as the opening out onto encounters with others. Here the test of knowledge is its credibility, so that what is needed is a positive yet critical sifting out of the credibility of witnesses, since in our ordinary lives we claim to know many things that we have not personally checked out. This trusting relationship begins with birth. It is interesting that a recent study purports that infants deprived of frequent face-to-face encounters suffer deficient development of their brain functions.

It is interesting, too, that the Greek word *prosopon* from which with Latin we derive our word person means "direct face-to-face encounter, seeing and being seen." The situation of knowledge, then, is radically social and personal. This makes of knowledge not simply a theoretical or abstract affair on the part of an individual (though that is certainly important), but an existential affair calling forth the whole person into relations with other persons. The primary model for knowledge, then, is not the mind in relation to physical nature, but interpersonal encounter. Nor is this optional for us, so that it is doubly unfortunate that the English translation leaves out the Latin insistence of the necessity of this human condition.<sup>4</sup> (Polanyi's concept of the tacit dimension is helpful in this regard.)

The aim of knowledge, then, is not simply the representation of reality, but also the constitution of society. The *communio personarum*, of which John Paul II speaks so often, is the basis for social life and community. If Aristotle found that the human quality of life could be completed only in the city, the *polis*, John Paul adds to that the deeper sense of the personal values intrinsic to that communal life. For we must ask ourselves, which understanding of knowledge best grounds and empowers the political order? Is it the limited conception of the acquisition and verification of evidence acquired by an individual, especially an individual armed with the hermeneutic of suspicion? Or is it not rather the interpersonal encounter in trust and friendship brought about by the necessary conditions of human existence and the fully human aspiration for the realization of positive values?

It is by this latter understanding that we both expand the horizon of our knowledge and deepen its foundations. For contrary to Hobbes, political life (like philosophy itself) is not best developed on the basis of the war of all against all brought to an uneasy compromise by submission to absolute power. Rather, political life flourishes on the basis of the friendship of citizens who, in a spirit of solidarity, participate in and for the good they share in common. In this endeavor reason finds itself in harmony with the instincts of faith; for it, too, seeks the *communio personarum* in that perfect society which is the communion of saints.

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### Notes

1. For a modern development of such a conception, see Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1947), *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1947), *The Range of Reason* (New York: Scribner, 1952). Etienne Gilson provides an historical reflection in *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: C. Scribner, 1938). For a contemporary discussion of the various forms of rationality, see *Rationality Today/La rationalite aujourd' hui* (ed. Th. Geraets. Ottawa, 1979).

2. The paradigmatic modern statement of such a conception may be found in Descartes' *Discourse of Method*, parts 1, 2, &4; and definitively in Kant's Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. A more popular statement is to be found in D'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril, 1963), which seeks to integrate the elements of mathematical precision and technical control.

3. The reference here, no doubt, is to some versions of what may be called "postmodernism," but also to a certain more general climate of historicism, relativism and the denial of universal human values. For a collection of contemporary essays on the issue see: *After Philosophy. End or Transformation?*, ed. K. Baynes et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1987).

4. Sec. 32: "Unusquisque, in credendo, fidem ponit in cognitionibus quas aliae personae sunt adeptae. Hac in re agnoscenda est quaedam significans intentio: una ex parte, cognitio ex fiducia videtur imperfecta cognitionis forma, quae paulatim per

evidentiam singillatim comparatam perfici debet, alia ex parte, fiducia divitior saepe exstat quam simplex evidentia, quoniam secum fert necessitudinem interpersonalem atque in discrimen committit non tantum personales intellectus facultates, verum etiam penitior facultatem sese aliis personis confidendi, validiorem et intimiorem cum illis necessitudinem statuendo.--Expedit ut in luce ponatur veritates in hac interpersonali relatione adeptas ad rerum gestarum vel philosophiae ordinem non attinere. Quod potius petitur est ipsa personae veritas."