

## UNIVERSITY AS CHURCH: *FIDES ET RATIO* AS A SOURCE FOR ECCLESIOLOGY

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*John Paul II's Fides et Ratio has taken a back seat in scholarly literature due to the attention given the juridical norms surrounding Ex Corde Ecclesiae. This article dissects the message of Fides et Ratio, calling for a new relationship between the disciplines of theology and philosophy. Collegiality is discussed not as a characteristic of persons but as the quality that should animate university departments in order to sustain cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary pursuits. The article concludes by articulating a functional ecclesiology: university as church.*

John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio* (1998) provides an opportunity for cross-disciplinary and inter-ecclesial dialogue on the importance of sustained attention to philosophical presuppositions and investigations concerning truth. The Pope calls upon philosophers and theologians to recover the historically reciprocal relationship between their disciplines, which "can prove genuinely fruitful for the communication and deeper understanding of the faith" (1998, #99). Additionally, as I will argue in this article, *Fides et Ratio* suggests the content of a distinctly Catholic approach to academic inquiry that offers one response in anticipation of the application of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (John Paul II, 1990) to the context of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States.

The contemporary historical context of *Fides et Ratio* suggests the disquiet within the magisterium and in certain quarters of the philosophy and theology academies over the popular and seemingly widespread acceptance of a relativist liberalism as the de facto philosophy of the times. Since the triumph of the Enlightenment project, which raised personal and subjective reason to the stature of an independent authority, the proponents of liberalism

have claimed the paradox of certainty and chaos that belies our faith tradition. This authority is at once sure for an absolutized individualism rooted in certainty, and doubt-producing in any interaction within a community that may be at odds (in chaos) with one or more of its individualized and equally autonomous members. The Pope (1998) is troubled by the confined preference of modern philosophy to examine the limits and conditions of human reason, while ignoring reason's thrust toward the transcendent. While these parameters are not necessarily problematic, a circumscribed investigation fails to recognize the truth, which is communicated by revelation and disciplined inquiry, which transcends those limits and which reason, aided by faith, can attain. Some members of the academies are troubled by the incommensurability and interminability of current academic discourse resulting, they argue, from a relativistic lack of trust in objective truth (MacIntyre, 1984).

Liberalism is not a new phenomenon on the western intellectual horizon. With the rise of the entrepreneurial and mercantile classes of the early Renaissance, a united Roman Christendom was surprised by an individualistic and increasingly fragmented membership that laid the foundations of a liberalist (and sectarian) modern world view (Tarnas, 1991). In addition to the Protestant reform and its successful claim to authority, other advances in secular fields of inquiry fueled suspicion of the status quo. Scientific claims about such things as the heliocentric nature of the universe and the human circulatory system, technological harnessing of energy by turbines and steam, and the widespread availability of printed matter disrupted the authority over natural and supernatural matters once held solely by the Catholic Church. The recent and frequent use of the narrative "I" suggests a significant turn from the feudal manor group and its allegiances to the individual as a subject proper and quite distinct from the liege community or the Church. The social response to this disintegration of a centralized authority was and is to distinguish the spheres of influence that authorities could claim and to liberate and protect peoples from unwelcome or inappropriate rule. Nevertheless, if the present unrest on the part of the papacy lies with a crisis of truth, retrenchment to dogmatic pronouncements will not satisfy the philosopher or theologian who seeks to uncover the depth of meaning our contemporary scientific, cultural, and social resources make known. Rather, a spirit of collegiality between the members of these disciplines would produce a consilial posture before the mysteries of God's love for the world and its inhabitants that ought not threaten either the academy or the magisterium.

The dialogue engendered by *Fides et Ratio* does not immediately find a place in the university, understood as an institution where the academic context of the search for truth is appropriately located. Yet, the content of *Fides et Ratio* points to the relationship between philosophy and theology on one hand and these academic disciplines and the magisterium on the other. The

Catholic college or university setting of these disciplines can consider and respond to the challenges the document raises. While the Pope addressed this encyclical to his "brother bishops," the encyclical commends Catholic scholars consciously to engage the potential for the integration of the truths of faith with the discoveries of reason about the nature of the created world. The academic setting of the Catholic college or university lends itself to an exploration of how best to investigate truth and defend the truths of salvation for which the Catholic tradition stands. The Catholic college or university may accept this charge by engaging in campus-wide activities that would be dedicated to its mission, which mission pertains to the intellectual service tradition of the Church (John Paul II, 1990). Further, Catholic institutions would continue to support their faculty members in their pursuit of truth through philosophical and theological investigations, which remain in dialogue with the disciplines of contemporary social and natural sciences.

Against the encroachment of liberalism or a relativist bearing of the sacred, social, and natural sciences, the encyclical calls for both caution and redress of error on the part of bishops and scholars. The bishops are charged to bear witness to the truth, to restore trust in knowing to contemporaries, and to remind both philosophers and theologians to retrieve a foundational metaphysics of human understanding which gives authority to reason informed by faith (John Paul II, 1998). The bishops may implement this witness through their teaching office, by assuring the faithful of the dignity of human reason in its search for truth, and by a summons to Catholic scholars and their learned societies to engage in and uphold the tradition, beginning with revelation. In terms of the relationship that the bishops have with the Catholic college or university surrounding the discussion of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, this relationship "should remain informal and dialogic in nature...[and] is one of communion and not control" (Leibrecht, 1994, p. 607). Further, if the *communio* alluded to in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* points to shared responsibility for common functions, duties, and offices of the magisterium and of theology (Malone, 1995), then *Fides et Ratio* may be the first occasion since *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* of "communio practice," where both collaboration and respect for one another's purposes are engaged.

The Church in the university or ecclesiology and collegiality take one of the directions toward which *Fides et Ratio* points and ask how the Catholic college or university may serve the faith tradition from a catechetical perspective and the faithful from a congregational perspective. Both the tradition and the faithful deserve a hearing in the investigation of the relationship between faith and reason without placing either at opposite sides of a spectrum or at cross purposes. Rather, the faith tradition and the faithful bring to dialogue the shared concerns over belief in an age of suspicion and suspense. Ecclesiology is attention to the assembly of believers, and collegiality is respect for the academic enterprise as the free exchange of ideas and findings

as engaged by scholars. Thus, by the Church in the university is meant those who gather to profess the truth as a result of talented and disciplined study. Combine that profession with a specific task to serve the Church in its work of safeguarding the truths of the good news and there emerges a dialogue between *fides et ratio*.

The following comments will consider first, the ecclesiology of the university; second, the collegiality that should be exercised between the academic disciplines, especially philosophy and theology; and third, the *communio* of the faith tradition as mediated by the magisterium and the Catholic college or university.

## **THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY: MYSTERY, PEOPLE OF GOD, AND SACRAMENT**

The Catholic university context, not unlike the local Church parish, presents an ecclesiology rooted in the Greek meaning of the word *ἐκκλησία*, “a convoked assembly.” Unique to the university assembly is the institutionalized gathering of scholars and students in an environment structured by an administration that supports the goals of education: the search for and transmission of truth. The question that both *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and *Fides et Ratio* pose for the Catholic university is whether the university ecclesiology is present as a mystery and sacrament of salvation (Rahner, 1975) as that mystery and sacrament relate to the people of God knowing God. Given the considerations of Vatican Council II (1964) in its dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, the Church is called to “reveal in the world . . . the mystery of the Lord” (#8). To consider then the mission of the Church, which is to present the revelation of Christ, places the context of the Church’s mission in the service of the mystery of that revelation. This mystery does not easily lend itself to the concrete business of education in a university context. Yet, as a Catholic institution, the university as church is precisely the place where some first encounter and others encounter more deeply a knowledge of Jesus Christ, the revelation of truth and love. The Catholic university assembly harvests truth in a manner unique among universities, disposing the community to the revelation of sacred and secular truths. With this harvesting the university as church engages the mystery of truth (Piderit, 1999).

The university as church gathers a people to bear and to witness truth. Not unlike the Body of Christ with its many members, the university is comprised of many disciplines, each in search of a particular truth but together united in sharing the process and the truth revealed. The particular truth investigated by any discipline depends on the methods of the discipline, its attempts and success at uncovering the truth, and the resulting analysis of the

relationship between reality as it is presently known and the mystery of the fullness of truth yet unknown. This analysis demands a posture of respect before academic expertise and revelation. Academicians, for example, already armed with understanding, approach their subject with disciplined inquiry, perhaps resulting in a revelation or a mystery unfolding. By denying that insight, the academic would remain mired in the banal when the uncommon and transcendent beckon. The revelation of the transcendent becomes for the academic the occasion to bear and witness truth to the university assembly. Thus, like the Body of Christ, the university as church with its many disciplines contributes to the concrete realization of truth in its students, faculty, and structural and administrative members of its body.

Herein lies the possibility of the Church in the university as sacrament. The Church, however conceived but rooted firmly in being the Body of Christ, is by that embodiment the primordial sacrament of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Consider the purpose of the sacraments from Vatican Council's *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963). In addition to conferring grace upon the faithful, sacraments are signs that signify a particular manifestation of God's self-communication to humankind and they are signs that also instruct (Vatican Council, 1963). The specific purpose of the institutional sacraments is to sanctify people, build up the Body of Christ, and give worship to God; the purpose of the Church, in the nature of sacrament, is to be a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity with all people (Vatican Council, 1964). The purpose of the university-church as sacrament then similarly sanctifies, strengthens, honors, and unites.

The university-church as sacrament is properly focused on the understanding that, "because they are signs they also [instrumentally] instruct" (Vatican Council, 1963, #59), this sign is the concrete realization of truth in its members through the instructive educational process. The university as church sanctifies, strengthens, honors, and unites like other parish churches and, unique to its mission, the university-church draws its community toward a reasoned approach and understanding of faith. Further, the university embodies academic but no less ritualized activities than the dispensation of divine life, sanctifying its members not by an *ordo* but by disciplined study, communication, and evaluation. The sacrament of building up the university body, like building up the Body of Christ the Church, capitalizes on the realization of individual potential and the employment of that potential for the good in service to others. The university worship, like the liturgical worship of thanks and praise, honors creation by a highly specialized exploration of the intricate realities of God's handiwork contained therein. Finally, through the instrument of the academic pursuit of truth, the university-church occasions a unique examination of revelation and its mysteries, breaking open the possibilities and the occasions of grace. If the task of the university is both to search for and to communicate truth, then the signs of the university are the

realities it manifests and instructs. The university may instrumentally bear the sacrament par excellence of the Church in our attempts both to understand in communion and to love God more. The university church as the embodied sacrament of an academic community thus offers the mystery of the intellectual life and its reasoned inquiry into the signs of faith.

## **COLLEGIALITY BETWEEN THE DISCIPLINES**

Within a university a spirit of collegiality rightly respects and invests its members with an authority that is shared equally among disciplines. That authority does not necessarily lead to an exercise of power outside the provenance of particular expertise but it does lend itself to mutual interaction and collaboration in the pursuit of similar ends (Cwiekowski, 1987). The interdisciplinary context within a university permits the cross-fertilization of ideas and provokes a critical consideration of expectations and methodological presuppositions. While neither attempting to undermine a colleague's examination of an issue nor claiming authority in a discipline not studied, interaction through dialogue hones the skills necessary for effective transmission of research findings. Moreover, interdisciplinary collaboration yields respect due to colleagues by recognizing their expert authority.

Collegiality between the members of the philosophy and theology academies rests on a history of trustful reliance and on subjects common to both. While philosophy relies on theology only for an examination of the phenomenon of religion, theology has traditionally called upon the methods and presuppositions of philosophical inquiry to engage the human capacity to understand the realities of concrete and transcendental existence. These philosophical systems have spawned within the disciplines of theology, among many others, a dualist approach to nature and grace, a nominalist approach to universals and individuals, and an empiricist approach to certainty and probability. That both disciplines benefit from interaction and collaboration is evidenced unapologetically in the tradition of the scholastics. That both disciplines now find proponents unwilling to interact uncritically perhaps occasions this encyclical-inspired dialogue.

Today the collaboration between philosophy and theology is neither perceptible nor as readily admitted as it was in the scholastic period. The plurality of contemporary philosophical systems and the democratization of education cast suspicion on dogmatic pronouncements of the past and on a present that might ignore the wisdom of peoples who have been silenced. Again, the status quo is challenged as it had been with the emerging modern world. Women and minorities offer in unparalleled fashion insight and the authority that accompanies revelatory truths. The contemporary demands of progressive methodologies for a deliberately defined context hearken to experience as the starting place of systematic transcendental reflection. Both philosophy

and theology have already considered the concrete manifestation of the particular phenomenal reality. But the implications of contemporary investigations reach further than previous socially constructed confines over what are the valid and valued experiences of reality; the thoughts of our predecessor scholastics on this valuing no longer suffice. Plurality here has threatened long-held determinative presumptions but also enriched the process and the results of philosophical and theological inquiry.

Consider the implications of a systematic transcendental reflection on the human person, the subject of both a theological and philosophical anthropology that challenges a European androcentric model. I have been engaged in an exploration of what it may mean to be human from the perspectives of a married, Catholic, white, middle-class, Jesuit-trained, neo-scholastic, woman moralist, attentive to and knowledgeable of the experiences of people of color, people with AIDS, and people with disabilities. My reflections begin with a consideration of my physical space and move to those of a person subjecting herself to a certain kind of objectification over what and where I am. My reflections continue on to the space that I occupy in my family, at the university, in church, with God, with my friends, and with those I do not know. These spatial contexts lead me time and again to one conclusion regarding what it means to be person: I am a person in relation to myself and to others. That this relationality becomes normative for me betrays a particular phenomenological philosophy that neither denies a transcendent revelation of the divine nor the historical possibility of my own (and others') existence. Further, as a theological category, this relationality is bound to the revelation of the radicalized relationship between God and humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The systematic transcendental reflection on the human person then is located in both philosophical and theological considerations of how best to be human in light of relationships. I am the best human being I can be when I nourish myself and the people to whom I am related with the gifts and talents developed from the nourishment given by those relations. This reflection differs significantly from a model that emphasizes a hierarchical order to relationships, which might assign a particular way to be if you are a woman, a child, or a minority. My reflection suggests perhaps anarchy, but offers an order based on receptivity and response, betraying a certain collegiality not unlike the overall interdisciplinary context of the university.

## ***COMMUNIO* WITHIN THE MAGISTERIUM AND THE UNIVERSITY**

Both *Fides et Ratio* and *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* address the relationship that is to be nourished between the teaching authority of the Church and the Catholic university. *Fides et Ratio* presents the relationship implicitly in its concern for the response of reasoned inquiry into the data of revelation as

transmitted through the Church. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* quite explicitly presents an *ordinatio* between the magisterial authority and the Catholic institutes of higher education. For *Fides et Ratio* the relationship is characterized by dialogue, however authoritatively demonstrative in its conclusions over who ultimately bears witness to the truth. For *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* the relationship is characterized by juridical categories that engender questions over the complementary functions of bishop and theologian. Given that the episcopal magisterium is rightly concerned with the preservation and proclamation of faith and that the university magisterium, in the persons of its theologians, is rightly concerned with scholarly inquiry mediating between faith and culture (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1989), *communio* between the two remains the order of the day. To the extent that the functions, duties, and offices of both the episcopacy and the university are to locate, protect, and defend truth, *communio* becomes the responsibility shared by the bishops and the university for the Church.

Thus, bishops and universities serve the Church and each other as members of one church. In this service bishops and universities share the responsibility of truth as it is found (1) in revelation, (2) in the tradition, and (3) in the living magisterium (John Paul II, 1998), of which theologians are a significant part. Service is key to fostering the spirit of *communio* that mediates faith catechetically and through reasoned and disciplined assent. Bishops present revelation as the founding truths of salvation; theologians examine revelation to consider what is revealed and to mediate its mysteries to contemporary culture. Bishops propose the tradition as the structure whereby truth is protected; theologians probe the tradition to turn its structure toward understanding the truth there protected. Bishops put forward the living magisterium as the hierarchy's proclamation of the truth for contemporary society; theologians move that teaching authority into a critical appreciation of how culture mediates that proclamation. Both institutions serve the Church and both are served by a mutual charge and response to the ongoing work of knowing God and the truth of the Incarnate Wisdom who was sent to live among us.

The encyclical nears its conclusion with this thought: "Theology is sustained in the search for truth by its ecclesial context and by the tradition of the people of God, with its harmony of many different fields of learning and culture within the unity of faith" (John Paul II, 1998, #101). The church in the university gives place to theology as one academic discipline among many and provides a rightly disciplined academic context for the dialogue between the faith tradition of the Church and reason inquiring after the truths therewith revealed. The ecclesial context of theology may be realized definitively for this post-modern world in the university setting where the university as church is the mystery, the assembly, and the sacrament that manifests grace by its instrumental witness as one setting of the Church, the Body of Christ.

The university theology in its ecclesial context then becomes the sacramental sign of instruction. The university as church uniquely establishes the assembly of people engaged in the search for truth and in the participation of its members in that truth. What other context, as we begin the 21st century, so publicly subsidizes that theological agenda as does the context of the Catholic colleges and universities? The collegiality within the university supports, independently of episcopal administrative handicaps, the intellectual authority of the theological and philosophical enterprise as well as the transmission of the truths of transcendental reality to the community there assembled. *Communio* mediates the faith tradition for the people of God and encourages and trusts reasoned inquiry into the truths of salvation by the university church in its theology faculties. Thus, "the presence of the church in the university milieu enters into the process of inculturation of the faith as a requirement of evangelization" (Laghi, Pironio, & Poupard, 1994, p. 80). The university ecclesiology properly locates the dialogue between *fides et ratio*, where theology and philosophy properly assume the academic context to uncover the ecclesial and sacramental content of *fides quaerens intellectum*.

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