

‘Faith and reason are like two wings...’

In December we looked at Vatican I’s teaching that God can be known with certainty even just by human reason. The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* (1870) went on to give infallible teachings on revelation; on faith; and on the relationship between faith and reason.

Natural reason cannot discover our *supernatural* destiny to share God’s own life in heaven: we need divine revelation. (cf. Vatican I, *Dei Filius* DS 3005) And even regarding truths reason can in principle discover, in his fallen state ‘man experiences many difficulties in coming to know God by the light of reason alone... This is why man stands in need of being enlightened by God’s revelation, not only about those things that exceed his understanding, but also “about those religious and moral truths which of themselves are not beyond the grasp of human reason, so that even in the present condition of the human race, they can be known by all men with ease, with firm certainty and with no admixture of error”. (Pius XII, *Humani Generis* (1950) DS 3876; cf. DS 3005; Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 6)’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 37-38)

God’s revelation calls for our response of faith. Vatican I proclaimed: ‘Without faith no one has ever attained justification, nor will anyone obtain eternal life unless he has persevered in it to the end.’ (*Dei Filius* DS 3012)

‘Since man is totally dependent upon God, as upon his Creator and Lord, and since created reason is absolutely subject to uncreated truth, we are bound to yield by faith the full homage of intellect and will to the God who reveals. The Catholic Church professes that this faith, which is the beginning of man’s salvation is a supernatural virtue whereby, inspired and assisted by the grace of God, we believe that what he has revealed is true, not because the intrinsic truth of things is recognised by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.’ (*Dei Filius* DS 3008)

So faith isn’t directly motivated by rational proof, but by the utter reliability of God, who is Primal Truth. Faith, St Paul said, depends not ‘on human philosophy but on the power of God’. (*1 Cor* 2:5) Yet Vatican I went on to say: ‘In order that the obedience of our faith be nevertheless in harmony with reason, God willed that exterior proofs of his revelation... especially miracles and prophecies, should be joined to the interior helps of the Holy Spirit... They are the most certain signs of divine revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all men.’ (*Dei Filius* DS 3009; cf. *Mk* 16:20; *Heb* 2:4) Such proofs are called *motives of credibility*.

Vatican I condemned with anathema the views that ‘no miracles are possible’; or that they ‘can never be recognised with certainty’; or that ‘the divine origin of the Christian religion cannot be legitimately proved by them’. (*Dei Filius* DS 3034) On the contrary, ‘the many wonderful external signs God has given’ can prove ‘with certitude by the natural light of reason alone’ the divine origin of Christianity. (Pius XII, *Humani Generis* DS 3876) Further, God endowed his Church ‘with manifest marks of his institution... It is to the Catholic Church alone that belong all those signs that are so numerous and so wonderfully arranged by God... The Church by herself... is a great and perpetual motive of credibility...’ (*Dei Filius* DS 3012-13)

The rational certainty attainable by motives of credibility is *moral* certainty, ‘beyond reasonable doubt’. This leaves room for the freedom of faith. (cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *ST* II-IIae, 2, 9, ad 3) Helped by the Holy Spirit, we freely step out *beyond* rational evidence to base our belief on

God's truthfulness, which gives *absolute* certainty. Faith, the *Catechism* teaches, (157) 'is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie... Revealed truths can seem obscure to human reason and experience, but "the certainty that the divine light gives is greater than that which the light of natural reason gives." (St Thomas)

St John Paul II opened his encyclical on faith and reason, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), with this image: 'Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth...' A bird needs both wings to fly, and Catholic teaching gives each its role:

- Reason is important and essential, but it isn't everything.
- Faith and reason are *distinct* from each other but are in *harmony*, both being gifts of God for knowing truth.
- Reason belongs to human *nature*, given to each one of us by God in our creation; faith belongs to the higher order of the *supernatural*, being possible only by God's grace.
- Faith goes *beyond* reason, teaching mysteries that reason cannot reach, such as the Trinity.
- Yet faith never *contradicts* reason. Logic is always valid. Vatican I stated, 'the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, and God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth.' (*Dei Filius* DS 3017)

Vatican I rejected two opposite heresies: *rationalism* (that values reason to the point of denigrating faith) and *fideism* (that values faith to the point of denigrating reason). Rationalist attitudes are often found among non-believers. Thus a rationalist might say we shouldn't accept anything on faith, but only what we can rationally prove for ourselves. Rationalist attitudes can also appear among Catholics. For example, picking and choosing which Church teachings we'll believe depending on which ones are acceptable to our own thinking, we set up as our supreme standard of truth our own reason rather than God's revelation. Or if a Catholic, correctly recognising that faith can be *supported* by rational evidence, then mistakenly goes on to *reduce* faith to this logical process – that's also rationalism. Reason can't replace the personal relationship, necessary for salvation, of absolute trust in God's word.

At the other extreme, forms of fideism can also be found among Catholics – for example, if someone says that reason is untrustworthy (even when used correctly, carefully employing sound logic); or that people should never use rational evidence to support Christian faith, or should never get involved in intellectual reflection on what God has revealed. Anti-intellectual disdain for reason limits the sphere of Christ's redemption. He came to redeem the whole of human nature, and that includes the human intellect.

St Paul was dismissive of the philosophy of his day. (cf. *1 Cor* 1:17-25) But over history, guided by the Holy Spirit, Christian thinkers gathered the 'seeds of the Word' God had scattered among different cultures. Sifting and developing the teachings of the philosophers, they brought them into submission to Christ – for example, showing how reason proves the existence of God, or the spiritual and immortal human soul. Human wisdom died with Christ on the Cross, but it also rose with him. From being the opponent of the Cross, reason has been recaptured for Christ, made the servant of faith and integrated with faith's teachings – and so redeemed.

Pope John Paul concluded *Fides et Ratio* by turning to Our Lady: 'The holy monks of Christian antiquity', he said, 'called Mary "the table at which faith sits in thought."' (108) And he prayed: 'May Mary, Seat of Wisdom, be a sure haven for all who devote their lives to the search for wisdom. May their journey into wisdom, sure and final goal of all true knowing, be freed of every hindrance by the intercession of the one who, in giving birth to the Truth and treasuring it in her heart, has shared it forever with all the world.'