

METAPHYSICS IN THE ENCYCLIC *FIDES ET RATIO*

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UDK 11 "Fides et ratio"

Pope John Paul II ceases not in pleasantly surprising us with his clear and profound encyclicals. Thus after the most important encyclicals *Veritatis splendor* and *Evangelium vitae*, he endowed the world with *Fides et ratio*, another encyclical of the exceptional importance. It appears in the time when the philosophical knowledge is doubted more and more, while the metaphysical knowledge is even less considered. In this article we shall make certain efforts in enquiring about place and importance of metaphysics in encyclical *Fides et ratio*.

The first trace of metaphysical reflection we find in the encyclical reference to the well known passage in the *Epistle to Romans* (1, 20) stating that through all that is created the "eyes of the mind" can come to know God. By this statement man is directed not only to the nearer causes of creatures we meet around us, regardless with what scientific preciseness and with what scientific method we can reach it, but he is directed to the necessary examination of the first causes, and that means metaphysical causes of beings. In this way the "human capacity for metaphysical enquiry"¹ is affirmed because he is indeed capable of conceiving the metaphysical cause which lies at the origin of all perceptible reality. It means that at the very origin of the world creation God anticipated and endowed man with this metaphysical capability of rising to his Creator through the medium of creatures, by means of capacity of his reason. This being not clear to the modern man is the effect of the Original Sin as well as of the individual sins.

That man is endowed with the capability of knowing metaphysical truths does not mean that he is ontologically a self-sufficient being. Already the *Book of Genesis*, through the description of the Garden of Eden and the tree of knowledge of good and evil (see *Gen* 2, 17) referred to the metaphysical insufficiency of human being. Namely, man could not distinguish good from evil only through his capabilities, but "was constrained to appeal to a higher source"².

1 *Fides et ratio* (FR) 22.

2 FR 22. Carlos Cardona was fully aware of the necessity of referring to the higher principle, namely to God, saying that "it is necessary to reach a certain knowledge of God first as to

In distinguishing and in opposing of the wisdom of God to the wisdom of this world, the Encyclical sees the necessity to find out different ways of reflection concerning the revealed wisdom. We dare say that one of them could be the metaphysical learning on the analogy of being. Namely, only the analogue talk is possible, for the profoundness of the divine wisdom surpasses our way of comprehending and of expressing, “crashing the circle of our usual schemes of reflection which are not able of expressing it in an adequate way”.³ The wisdom of this world, unfortunately, eliminates metaphysics of the first and transcendent cause while trying to establish this world immanently. That’s why this “wisdom” could not in its weakness recognize the foundation of its power, while the Divine Revelation undoubtedly confirms it in the following words: “For when I am weak, then am I powerful.”⁴

In his heart Holy Father concerns human person with a special care. That’s why he clearly says it is true that a person realizes himself through the free choice of values. However, it is essential that the values were true, for “only true values can lead people to realize themselves fully, allowing them to be true to their nature.”⁵ And these true values can not be found by turning in on oneself, but necessarily by opening oneself to the possibility of finding them in the dimensions surpassing him. Only in that way every one can become his own self and grow as free and mature person. And just the metaphysical reflection offers this possibility of our mind opening to the transcendental.

Long time ago Aristotle taught that “all man long for knowledge”⁶, meaning that all of them try hard to reach the truth. As we already know there are partial truths for which metaphysics is not interested directly⁷; but there exist those eternal truths, as the truths on the meaning of our life and of our death. Man is by his nature related to these questions and that is why nobody can escape them. It is true that in the haste of our time we can forget them for a while, but they are waiting for us and is only a question of time when they will appear in front of our mind’s eyes in their full seriousness and profoundness. That’s why man is searching for something absolute, something that

distinguishing between good and evil”. (C. Cardona, *Metafisica del bene e del male*—Ares Milano, 1987. p. 151)

3 FR 23. E. Gilson wrote excellently on the impossibility of the adequate talk on God (Comp. *Introduction to the Christian Philosophy*, FTI Zagreb. 1995. p. 57–65)

4 2 Cor. 12, 10

5 FR 25.

6 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 1, 980 a., *Metafizika* — transl. in Croatian by Tomislav Ladan, SNL, Zagreb. 1985., p. 1.

7 The Encyclical remarks that at the end every partial truth shows itself in its universality, for “if something is true, then it must be true for all people and for all times.” (no. 27.)

shall offer him the answer to these questions. He has been searching for “something ultimate, which might serve as the ground of all things.”⁸ Just in his searching for that “ulterior truth which would explain the meaning of life”⁹, the metaphysical nature of this search is best revealed. That final reality to which our reason is directed and searches for is that first principle of all existing, that metaphysics calls it the act of being (*actus essendi*) and regards the knowledge of it as the highest reach of the natural capabilities of human mind.

The Historical Development of Faith and Reason Relations

In analyzing this relation through their historical context, this Encyclical observes even the very development of the metaphysical thought. Thus it finds the first traces of the metaphysical search all the way back to the Greek myths in which they tried to examine “the origin of the gods and of the universe”.¹⁰ In this way the first Greek philosophers really tried to discover the first principles through which they could offer a rational justification or a foundation for a faith in the divinity¹¹.

Then the first Christians met with the pagan philosophy, and this meeting was not so simple. Many ideological duels of the Christians with the wrong Gnostic theories on the knowledge of the divine testify to it.¹² On the other side Christianity offered an answer to the question about the meaning of life, on which the Greek philosophical genius didn’t offer the answer. First Christian philosophers looked in the philosophy just for that element of wisdom which is most directly related to metaphysics and on which Encyclical specially places the stress. In that sense it brings the very significant Clement of Alexandria quotation saying: “Those who love the **wisdom** which creates and teaches all, i. e. the knowledge of the Son of God, we call them philoso-

8 FR 27

9 FR 33

10 FR 36

11 Werner Jaeger wrote in detail about this problem in his book: *Die Theologie der fruhen griechischen Denken*. He suggests that Aristotle, under the notion of “theologia” understood “the fundamental philosophical science” which he also called ‘the first philosophy’ or ‘the knowledge of the first principles’. His followers called it then metaphysics” (trans. in Italian: *La teologia dei primi pensatori greci*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1982. p. 6.) Compare also W Jaeger., *Paideia: La formazione del uomo greco.*, voll I, –La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1984., separately cap. IX: *Il Pensiero filosofico e la scolastica*, p. 283–342.

12 To observe the full scope and seriousness of this conflict, one needs to study the exceptionally valuable work of Saint Ireneus of Lion, bearing a significant title: *Adversus Haereses*.

13 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromati*, VI 7, 55, 1–2 PG 9, 277 (accent is ours)

phers.”¹³ Indeed, philosophy for Clement is nothing else but practicing of wisdom, and “wisdom is knowledge of the divine and the human things, and of their causes”.¹⁴

Man by himself cannot reach all the depth of wisdom, so Greeks were right in defining philosophy as lover of wisdom. Meanwhile, God helps him much in that sense. The Christian thinkers were aware of that fact. So for instance St. Thomas Aquinas possessed an immense intuition concerning the importance the Holy Spirit has in this ripening of the human knowledge towards the depth of wisdom. He was fully conscious that this wisdom was the gift of Holy Spirit, and not the natural quality of the human being, and also that it belongs to it to “judge according to the Divine truth”.¹⁵ This kind of wisdom he never mixed with the other two kinds of wisdom, theological one and philosophical one. An immense merit goes to him because he knew how to harmonize them magnificently. And he could do so, the Encyclical emphasizes, for the very reason his philosophy is “not merely a philosophy of ‘what seems to be’ but a philosophy of ‘what is’”.¹⁶ This expresses the real essence of the Thomas’ metaphysical structure.

Emphasizing this characteristic of the Thomas’ philosophy, the Encyclical in reality gives us possibility of foreseeing what kind of metaphysics shall be needed for a successful and complementary cooperation with the reflection over the Revealed Truths. Just this kind of metaphysics made the human mind possible to reach the highest peaks of its powers of cognition and to know the deep unity of truth, which we can really know through the different ways.

History teaches us that the following generations didn’t understand the profound value and the original authenticity of this metaphysics and so they didn’t continue explorations according to its spirit and its principles. On the contrary they, in a rationalistic spirit, built such a philosophy that was absolutely separated from any contents of faith.¹⁷ This wrong course in philosophical exploration reached its apogee in the last century when some representatives of idealism sought to transform faith and its contents into “dialectical structures which could be grasped by reason”.¹⁸ This course effects reflected even on the sphere of scientific research where completely disappeared any relation with Christian vision of the world, namely any appeal to

14 *Stromati* 1, 5. 30. I It is clear Clement here thinks about the knowledge of the first causes, being most directly in the realm of metaphysics.

15 *S. Th.* II-II, q. 45. a. 1, ad q, II-II q 45, a. 2., FR 44

16 FR 44: “Eius vere est philosophia essendi et non apparenti dumtaxat”.

17 Re: FR 45.

18 FR 46. It is not only about those faith truths that reason can reach but also about the faith truths as the Death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ about which our mind can not build the adequate notions or ideas.

metaphysics and morality. It is clear the human person lost its central place in this kind of exploration, and on its place there came the technological progress which has been more and more assuming the role of a pagan demiurge. The climax of this wrong philosophy is displayed in the baleful *metaphysics of nihilism* that does not find the metaphysical foundation of any existence in God as an Autonomous Act of Being (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, or as the Encyclical in no. 79 calls it: *id quod per se Est*), but in nothingness. It is regarded on the contrary, that the existence offers us “no more than an occasion for sensations and experiences in which the ephemeral has pride of place”.¹⁹

We caught sight of another loss occurred to the modern culture because of leaving out the metaphysical reflection. From Wisdom and from universal knowledge philosophy reduced itself to one of the limited spheres of human knowledge and sometimes to those marginal spheres. Throwing away metaphysical of the human mind i. e. its capability of knowing the truth and of exploring the absolute certain philosophers took as the only goal of their reflection to gain the subjective security or a profitable practicality.

The Church's Magisterium Interest for Metaphysics

The Church teaches clearly that philosophy, including metaphysics, should have an autonomy of its own even when it enters a relation to theology. This is valid in a special way for its principles and the method. In spite of this the Church Magisterium “can and must” in the light of faith express a critical judgement regarding particular philosophies and their teachings, especially regarding questions concerning God, the human being, human freedom and ethical behavior. Conscious of diversity of philosophies and opinions, “It is the Church’s duty to indicate the elements in a philosophical system which are incompatible with her own faith.”²⁰ In that sense the Encyclical recalls the past times when the Church marked some particular philosophic disciplines as being wrong and not compatible with the Catholic faith. Such was the case with the wrong doctrines concerning the pre-existence of the soul²¹, the doctrine of double truths of Latin Averroists²², and some others.

Since the middle of the last century the Church Magisterium has frequently warned about the faulty doctrines that were founded on wrong metaphysics or even threw metaphysics away. Those doctrines are known under

19 FR 46.

20 FR 50.

21 Re: the Constantinople Synod, DS 403.

22 Synod in Vienna, Decret *Fidei catholicae*, DS 902., see Lateran Synod, the Bull: *Apostolici regiminis*, DS 1440.

the names of fideism, radical traditionalism, rationalism and ontologism. The Church warnings in this century may be added to these regard to agnosticism, immanentism, Marxism and Communism.²³

Following this historical survey the Encyclical speaks with particular anxiety and concern about our time which expresses a complete distrust of the power of human reason. The worst of all is that it is not about some individual thinkers but of a common mentality of a certain period. It seems so that in our time the metaphysics itself has been suffering the worst consequences of all philosophical disciplines. Namely, there is a talk at times of “the end of metaphysics” (*de interitus metaphysicae*), trying so to make philosophy to rest content with more modest tasks such as the simple interpretation of facts or an enquiry into restricted fields of human knowing or its structures.²⁴

We can see the consequences of this metaphysics devastation not only in the field of philosophy but also in the theological sphere. Thus again a certain rationalism gains ground in some contemporary theologies. As a necessary reaction to these rationalistic tendencies, we should say as the reverse of the medal, there appears a specific form of fideism which is rather spread and the Encyclical calls it “biblicism” (*biblicismus*).²⁵

Holy Father warns towards the dangers arising from not giving adequate attention and from belittling the classic philosophy and its ideas, ending his warnings with encouraging philosophers — be they Christian or not — to go back to metaphysics, to have confidence in human mind and never to abandon passion to explore the ultimate truth.²⁶

Besides pointing out to wrong philosophies, the Magisterium also constantly offered the cases of true metaphysical thought who knew how to realize the productive cooperation with Revelation. So Leon XIII through his Encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, defines the metaphysics of St. Thomas as the best way in renewing the use of philosophy for the needs of faith. Besides this way, there were other forms of philosophical speculation which continued the fruitful cooperation of faith and reason.

The Church Magisterium documents went stimulating and with cautioning about the necessity of good philosophical, consequently the metaphysical formation. Here we are mentioning but some: *Gaudium et spes* (no. 14–15,

23 Re: FR 52–54

24 Re: FR 55

25 Comp. FR 55 Here the Encyclical warns that in the foundation of each hermeneutic method there is a philosophy. It is necessary then, and before we use the hermeneutic method in interpreting Holy Scriptures, to examine the philosophic value of its foundation.

26 FR 56

20–21), *Optatam totius* (no. 15), *Redemptor hominis* (no. 8) and also many other documents by Holy Father John Paul II.²⁷

In spite of this, the interest in a research diminishes in many Catholic schools, not only in scholastic philosophy but in philosophy generally. The fading of the interest in philosophy there exists not only with the students but also with the theologians. That's why Holy Father explicitly says that he "cannot fail to note with surprise and displeasure that this lack of interest in the study of philosophy is shared by not a few theologians."²⁸ There are various reasons for this state of things, but a distrust of reason comes as first, and with the philosophers that distrust appeared after they completely "abandoned metaphysical study of the ultimate human questions"²⁹, as to directing their attention to the individual problems or to those connected only to some spheres of life, and at times to purely formal problems only.

The Encyclical then regards that philosophy has its application in different branches of theology and in the dogmatic, fundamental and moral theology in the first place. However, it is of the greatest importance for theology when last one appears as *intellectus fidei*. So when Holy Father says the speculative dogmatic theology "presupposes and implies a philosophy of the human being, the world and, more radically, of being (*ipsius 'esse'*)³⁰", then it is completely clear that he directs to the necessity of metaphysics and we dare say — the metaphysics of being.

In the atmosphere of this kind of metaphysics the Encyclical explicitly makes mention of the very term "Christian philosophy" explaining that it is the question of the specific 'state of philosophy' namely of a particular way of speculation i. e. "a philosophical speculation conceived in dynamic union with faith".³¹

But so that philosophy should indeed be consonant with the revealed word of God, thus being useful to theology, from the philosophy shall be required to as soon as possible doing as follows:

27 In the note no. 84. Encyclical brings a series of documents as well as the Holy Father's speeches on this theme.

28 FR 61

29 FR 61

30 FR 66

31 FR 76 It seems that Holy Father, not mentioning the names, decided for Maritain's views regarding the discussion on the existence of Christian philosophy. The essence of the Maritain's views is in his "distinguishing between the nature of philosophy and the condition in which it really and historically is in the human subject". (J. MARITAIN: *Sulla philosophia Christiana, Vita e pensiero*, Milan 1978., p. 34. The Maritain conclusion is that philosophy by its nature cannot be defined as Christian, but that at any case there exists the Christian state of philosophy (re. *ibid* p. 41). Those more interested in this problem are directed to the fundamental study: ANTONIO LIVI — *Il problema della filosofia cristiana.*, Patron, Bologna 1974, and also to so detailed bibliography on this problem done by Etienne Gilson in his work *L'Esprit de la philosophie medievale* (J. Vrin, Paris, 1936.)

- 1) to regain its lost dimension of wisdom, what means the search for ultimate meaning of everything real and which only metaphysics can give it. Philosophy which would deny the existence of this meaning should be not only inadequate in the reflection on God's Revelation, but also totally false philosophy;³²
- 2) to verify, in the metaphysical reflection on man, his capability to know the truth;
- 3) what is most important for metaphysics, that the nature of such a philosophy is genuinely metaphysical. It means that it is capable to transcend the empirical data in search for truth in order to attain something absolute, ultimate and foundational. Here the Encyclical does not want to analyze the individual types of metaphysics that arose in the course of history, but it only wants "to state that reality and truth do transcend the factual and the empirical"³³, and also that man possesses the capacity of knowing this transcendent and metaphysical dimension in a way that is true and certain, albeit imperfect and analogical.

In analyzing the aspects of the Christian philosophy, namely the questions to which it tries to find answers, the questions like those on evil and suffering, on the meaning of life or the one philosophically most radical question "Why does something exist?", all the depth of the demand for the metaphysics of being is obvious. For "Studying the whole reality regarding the being and its most radical internal principle, the act of being, is the essential part of metaphysical work"³⁴, and no other discipline could substitute the metaphysics in this sphere. Just in the horizon of this metaphysics originates a notion of a free personal God who is the Creator of the world, and of the person as a spiritual being.³⁵

Person — a privileged locus for the metaphysics

Metaphysics also shows itself as a philosophical discipline which makes it possible to ground the concept of personal dignity in virtue of their spiritual nature possessing its own being which it gains thanks to the participation on

32 Re. FR 81

33 FR 83

34 Lluís Clavell, *Metafisica e liberta.*, Armando Editore, Roma 1996, p. 135

35 Re. FR 76. It is useful to remind here that the philosophical truths on the free creation of the world out of nothing and the notion of human person are just the discoveries of the "Christian philosophy" of the Middle Ages, that the Greek thought didn't know.

the divine Being. And because of that the person constitutes a privileged locus for the encounter with being, and hence with metaphysical enquiry.³⁶

It should be said that such a chance has not been offered us only here, but anywhere wherever you meet the call toward the absolute and the transcendent, where man can discover an ascent to the metaphysical dimension of reality. Namely, it is not possible to keep to the experience alone, be it I don't know how interior and spiritual. Speculative thinking must penetrate to the spiritual core and the ground from which it rises. Thus Holy Father thinks a great challenge is facing us in the third millennium, and it is "to move from *phenomenon* to *foundation*, a step as necessary as it is urgent."³⁷ which means to move from phenomenology to metaphysics.

Philosophy that would not possess this metaphysical openness would be radically unsuited to theology. For, it is just the metaphysics which plays "an essential role of mediation in theological research."³⁸ That is why the theology without this metaphysical horizon could not move beyond an analysis of religious experience, nor would it allow theology — in so far as it is *intellectus fidei* — to give a coherent account of the universal and transcendent value of revealed truth.

Consequently, as to successfully fulfilling the actual and the important task of comprehending the revealed truth, namely the explanation of the understanding of faith (*intellectus fidei*), theology should use the philosophy of being. And "set within the Christian metaphysical tradition, the philosophy of being is a dynamic philosophy which views reality in its ontological, causal and communicative structures."³⁹ Its imperishable authenticity and its force originate from the fact it is based upon the very act of being itself (*actu ipso 'esendi'*) which enables it to surpass every limit and reach God. We think we can undoubtedly say that here is the question of St. Thomas Aquinas' metaphysics.⁴⁰

Conclusion

At the end the Encyclical appeals to theologians encouraging them that in the making of the intimate bond between the theological and the philosophical wisdom, they recover and express to the full "the metaphysical dimension of

36 FR 83

37 FR 83

38 FR 83

39 FR 97

40 FR 98. Holy Father does not explicitly mention here the philosophers names, but we dare say he undoubtedly thinks of St. Thomas Aquinas philosophy as well as on its contemporary but true elaboration like the one worked out by E. Gilson, J. Maritain, C. Fabro and others.

truth”⁴¹ in order to enter the critical dialogue with both contemporary philosophical truth as and with the philosophical tradition in its all aspects, whether consonant with the word of God or not. Then he appeals to the philosophers, and to all teachers of philosophy, to have courage, in the flow of philosophical tradition of the imperishable values, to recover the philosophical thought, recovering in it the speculative, the truthful, as well as the metaphysical dimension.

At the first glance it might seem to a reader that we have exaggerated a little bit in stressing the importance of the metaphysics in this Encyclical, but it is not so. Namely, we are not those who insist on it, but it is Holy Father who literally “insists so strongly on the metaphysical element”⁴². He does not do this only because in his heart he feels a necessary need for the use of a healthy metaphysics in the theology, but also because he, being a true philosopher, believes it is a necessary way to overwhelm the crisis dominating all the spheres of the modern philosophy. The need for the metaphysics becomes more evident, he thinks, if you have in your mind the development the hermeneutic sciences have gained today as well as the different analysis of the language. For, notwithstanding the large benefit from their progress they still stimulate the distrust towards the capabilities of the human reason⁴³, and which should and could be regained through a true metaphysics of being.

41 FR 105

42 FR 83

43 FR 84