Pope John Paul II’s latest encyclical, *Fides et Ratio (Faith and Reason)*, was signed on September 14, 1998, the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross, and launched five weeks later on October 20, the 20th anniversary of his pontificate. It was greeted by much comment in the press, though this was based more on the Vatican press releases than even a cursory reading of the encyclical itself. Now it is time for more serious study and commentary. In this article I will respond to the encyclical as a philosopher, recognising at the same time that responses from several other positions are also necessary in order to get a clear picture of the encyclical. Firstly, I will present a reading of the encyclical that is encouraging to the project of philosophy. Secondly, I will address the central issue of the encyclical, the problem of faith and reason, and the question of its resolution. Thirdly, I will respond to the criticisms the Pope raises about philosophy and to the requirements he sets for a legitimate philosophy. Finally, I will raise some concerns about how the Pope speaks about truth.

The Pope’s Encouragement of Philosophy

The first thing that is to be said about this encyclical is that it is extremely encouraging towards the project of philosophy and towards philosophers. It was heralded as an essay on philosophy, and, now that it has appeared, it can, in fact, be viewed as that, written by the Pope not as philosopher, though trained in philosophy, but magisterially as Bishop of Rome and Primate of the Universal Church.

The encyclical is encouraging because John Paul II presents philosophy as an activity that is essential both to the flourishing of human life and to the richest articulation of Christian faith. It is the Pope’s view that a human being is “one who seeks the truth”. (28) Philosophy does this in a particularly satisfying way because it seeks solutions to ultimate questions and deals with them universally. We might add that it deals with reality as a whole rather than rather than cutting off some particular part of being. Theology, on the other hand, is described by the Pope in this way: “The chief purpose of theology is to provide an understanding of Revelation and the content of faith.” (93) In this it needs philosophy both in its act of interpretation of the Scriptures and Tradition and in its act of speculating upon what is found there. (65) Moreover, the Pope insists that theologians not simply use “this or that concept or element” of philosophy (73) but that they know it in depth. (61, 65)

The Pope affirms Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*, which, over a hundred years ago, began a renewal of the intellectual life of the Church by showing the importance of philosophical reflection and by its insistence on the value of the Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas. This encyclical goes further in two important respects. Firstly, the Pope stresses the autonomy of philosophy, which “must remain faithful to its own principles and methods”. Secondly, he asserts frequently that “the Church has no philosophy of her own”. (49) Further, his long discussion of the development of philosophy and theology in Chapter Four shows an openness to the ways in which human thought unfolds and therefore recognition of the development of thought.

Something must be said about the Pope’s insistence on the right and duty of the magisterium to respond to philosophical positions that threaten faith. (Ch. 5,

\[\text{\footnote{1}}\] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio (Faith and Reason)* (Strathfield: St Paul’s Publications, 1998). The encyclical is also available on the world wide web at www.vatican.va. References to the text will be given as paragraph numbers in the text.

\[\text{\footnote{2}}\] If this is a definition, I note that it is curiously modern in that it cuts out a part of being, namely Revelation and the content of faith, at the subject matter of theology. Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, insists that the science of theology is about God (primarily) and about all creation as related to God (secondarily) under the formality of being known through revelation. See *Summa theologiae* I q. 1.

The simple case is where these positions directly contradict Christian doctrine, but it may also be that the general tenets of a philosophy are incompatible with theological inquiry. (50) The first is not difficult to deal with as it is a negative criterion. A statement, for instance, that denies the possibility of the existence of God is, of course, going to be condemned. The second, as references to historicism and to the historical limitations of various systems of thought show (51, 54, 87, 95, 97), is necessarily going to demand more subtlety. In either case, however, philosophers need not complain, at least in principle. Their response will depend on their stance towards faith and reason. (75-77) A philosopher without faith will likely ignore the edict. One who is a believer doing philosophy will be faced with a new and interesting challenge. A theologian using philosophy will be driven to inspect more closely the content of faith. Conflict is more likely to arise over the validity of a magisterial judgement or over the manner of the exercise of such power.

**Problem of Faith and Reason and its Solution**

Formally, the problem of faith and reason can be put fairly easily:

Christian faith is said to be in accordance with reason and yet to go beyond reason. This claim immediately gives rise to a difficulty. On the one hand, the concordance of faith with reason seems to reduce Christian belief to rational thinking and to natural human experience; on the other hand, the difference between faith and reason seems to make belief unreasonable and arbitrary.\(^3\)

Materially, we might say that when people engage in such activities as science and philosophy, on the one hand, and religion, theology and magisterial teaching, on the other, difficulties arise in reconciling both the nature of the activities and some of their fruits. As these activities take place in time and vary in their outcomes, “the problem” will arise differently in different times. The Pope acknowledges this by tracing in Chapter IV the important moments of the encounter between faith and reason.

The Pope gives special place to two theologians: Saint Anselm (14, 42, 74) and Saint Thomas Aquinas (13, 43-45, 57-61, 74, 78). Anselm, writing in the eleventh century, dared in his *Proslogion*, which is quoted early in the encyclical, to attempt a proof for the existence of God. In so doing, he turned reason towards faith itself and showed that faith will not only survive but also flourish under the scrutiny of reason. Thomas, writing in the thirteenth century, was able to master all of the new learning that had come into the West by that time and also to give due proportion to both philosophy and theology. By generating a theology of God, creation and salvation that took all of this into account, he was able to claim authentically that there could be no opposition between the truth of reason and the truth of faith.

John Paul II does not offer a solution to the problem of faith and reason as it arises today. That is work for theologians with the aid of philosophers. He does, however, put himself in and draw us into the line of Anselm and Thomas. Christian faith can dare to deal with the challenges that come to it from natural reason, and we can be confident that when different disciplines reach true conclusions about significant issues they will be in agreement. As Bishop of Rome, what he can do is refute philosophical positions that contradict faith, propose parameters for a solution and exhort philosophers, scientists and theologians to seek the truth about things. This last, I suggest, is what the encyclical is primarily about.

Three principles cited in the encyclical that underlie the project are worthy of mention here. Firstly, the knowledge that is given to us through revelation is a gratuitous expression of God’s love. It “is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason”. Though reasonable in itself, it might not have been given to us. (15) Secondly, “the unity of truth is a fundamental premise of human reasoning” (34), so that, although conflicts arise, once the issues are worked out, there should be no conflict between faith and reason. Thirdly, advancement in knowledge is a communal activity, which is why the Pope reaffirms [60] “theology’s duty to recover its relationship with philosophy”. (101)

**The Pope’s Criticisms of and Requirements for Philosophy**

In the final chapter of the encyclical, the Pope notes some criticisms of and requirements for both philosophy and theology. In philosophy, he sets out to review “some currents of thought which are especially prevalent today” and which he believes are dangerous to the Christian tradition. (86). He gives cursory attention to eclecticism, historicism, scientism, and pragmatism. (86-89) His strongest

---

criticism, however, is for those elements of postmodern philosophy that claim that “the human being must now learn to live in a horizon of total absence of meaning”. (91) Despite early reactions in the press, these are hardly extraordinary criticisms. While the project of philosophy must move according to the logic of its own conversation, it can hardly be claimed that the twentieth century has not been a period of considerable darkness. What the Pope can be best seen as doing is entering that conversation in an exhortative way so as to nudge it towards more enriching topics.

An earlier criticism of philosophy in the encyclical, however, raises more difficult issues. From the late medieval period onwards, the Pope sees and criticises the emergence of “a philosophy which was separate from and absolutely independent of the contents of faith”. (45) Questions arise. How can philosophy accept input from Christian revelation, if its methodology is based on evidence and reason? If there are things that we know through revelation but not at all clearly through reason about God and creation, can we, indeed, continue to think about them philosophically? (80) If, through their successful translation into philosophical language in the middle ages, revealed truths have become part of our common heritage, can philosophy ignore them and still maintain any claim to universality? Some, like John Milbank, claim that philosophy can no longer be done and that what stands for philosophy is really corrupt theology. The Pope clearly affirms that philosophy is possible today, but his insistence that it stay close to faith raises difficult questions. (85-86)

For completeness, I note that the Pope offers three requirements for a philosophy that is going to be adequate to the task of collaborating in the articulation of the word of God. Firstly, it must recover its interest in the meaning of human life and activity so as to shed light on what it is that we do in the world and on what is good. (81) Secondly, it must provide a convincing verification of the possibility of knowing what is. (82) Thirdly, it must recover an appreciation of things that transcend empirical data so as to establish a metaphysics that reaches to first principles. (83) As the Pope admits, this is a daunting task. (85) It cannot be achieved simply by returning to the past, because we have seen and have said things that had not been seen or said before. It is legitimate that at a given time philosophers may conclude that such a metaphysics cannot be achieved.

The Issue of Truth

Many philosophers will be surprised by the frequency with which the Pope uses the term “truth”, even though early in the document he indicates that the letter will concentrate “on the theme of truth itself and on its foundation in relation to faith” (6). It occurs over 360 times and amounts to about 1% of the total text. In contrast, other key words occur less frequently: “faith” - 208; “reason” - 161; “philosophy” - 210; “theology” - 82; “true” - 68. While one admires his conviction that there is a truth of things to be found and his energy in seeking it, the very frequency of his usage of the term is likely to raise questions.

At one point, the Pope quotes the first lines of Aristotle’s Metaphysics, “All human beings desire to know.” (25) He goes on to say, “and truth is the proper object of this desire.” It is hardly likely that Aristotle would say this. The object of the desire is the condition of knowing, even if this be modified as “knowing truly”. Nor can the object of knowing be said to be truth; it is, as Aristotle goes on to say, things. Truth is a quality of judgements and apprehensions, neither an abstract nor a concrete entity in itself, and is, therefore, better expressed as a qualifier, for example, as by the adjective, true. Later Aristotelians, and especially Aquinas, will say that the proper object of knowledge is being. To be sure, teaching about the transcendental modes of being indicates that all being is one, true, good and beautiful (21), so that one could readily interpret the Pope’s use of the term, “truth”, here as “being as true”, (30) but his tendency to use the noun rather than the adjective and in such a concrete manner is likely to be worrying to philosophers.

A different dimension of the issue shows up when one realises that the Pope uses the term “opinion” only 13 times and that eight of these occurrences are in the chapter on the magisterium’s role in correcting philosophical error. In fact, he uses [61] “opinion” only in the senses of mere or false or novel opinion. What this move does is obliterate the Greek awareness of the interrelationship between true knowledge, sound opinion, error and ignorance. It was Socrates’ insight that a move out of error or opinion was more readily towards ignorance or not knowing than towards true knowledge (episteme). That daily life and discourse continue depends on the acceptance of the best available opinion. To remove sound opinion from the field of human endeavour is to remove all grounds for legitimate disagreement and hence for any discussion at all.

---

4 See John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), passim.

5 These figures are the best I could get from my word processor.

Andrew Murray, Faith and Reason: A Philosophical Response, p. 3.
The point of this criticism is not to demean, in the Pope’s language, either the notion of truth or the desire for truth. It is rather, firstly, to step back from any objectification of the notion of truth and, secondly, to restore recognition that a vast amount of human activity has to do with opinion. Such opinion is not only “mere” or “false” opinion but sound or warranted opinion and might be philosophical opinion or theological opinion or magisterial opinion. By recognising this area of human activity, we would be better placed to clarify where strict truth claims were legitimate and where they were not. On the other hand, being human calls for a high degree of truthfulness. This is implied in the Pope’s existential definition of a human being - “one who seeks the truth” (28) - but is a theme that he does not develop in the encyclical. It seems worthwhile to investigate “truth” through virtue rather than through authority, because, even if ultimately that authority is Divine, access to it is obscured by human fallibility. Once one investigates the theme of truthfulness, it soon becomes apparent that this involves both truth-seeking and truth-telling.

To take up another issue, the Pope moves backwards and forwards between the terms “truth” and “meaning”, and this is tantalising. In discussing the intellectus fidei or speculative theology, he suggests that truth is found in the Scriptures and that theology brings to light its salvific meaning. (66) Perhaps truth is a given and further speculation is a consideration of its meaning, but the Pope also speaks of true meaning (20), as sure he must. Later in the letter, he explicitly raises the issue of the relationship between meaning and truth. (94) Although this is interesting, the term, “meaning”, tends to arise in discussions of the coherence theory of truth, so that it is not clear to me how his use of the distinction fits with the Pope’s strong affirmation of the correspondence theory of truth. (82) It would seem that there is, here, room for serious philosophical analysis.

**Conclusion**

Philosophers who are Christians must acknowledge the Pope’s appeal to them to recover the authentic wisdom of the philosophical tradition. (106) Even as they accept the insights of modernity, as does the Pope (48), they are called also to look back into the tradition for insight into recurrent issues, even if today they are arising in new ways. Such a call opens up a field of very interesting work. Further, the encyclical is philosophically encouraging and, at the same time, challenging. It is a complex document that looks at the issues from several points of view. These need to be reconciled, as one assumes that they are reconciled in the mind of the author. Such a task will not be accomplished in a first reading as there are many points to ponder and many connections to be made.

Andrew Murray sm is a member of the Australian Province of the Marist Fathers. He completed a doctorate in philosophy at The Catholic University of America and teaches now at The Catholic Institute of Sydney. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at a forum, “The Two Wings of the Human Spirit”, hosted by Australian Catholic University at North Sydney on Thursday May 6, 1999.