



9-1-2005

The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays on Fides et Ratio, edited by David Ruel Foster & Joseph W. Koterski, SJ

Joseph M. Incandela

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Incandela, J. M. (2005). The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays on Fides et Ratio, edited by David Ruel Foster & Joseph W. Koterski, SJ. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 9 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0901142013>

This Book Review is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email JCE@nd.edu.

THE TWO WINGS OF CATHOLIC THOUGHT: ESSAYS ON *FIDES ET RATIO*

DAVID RUEL FOSTER, & JOSEPH W. KOTERSKI, S.J., EDS.
THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA PRESS, 2003
\$19.95, 232 pages

Reviewed by Joseph M. Incandela

The editors describe the purpose of this volume “to help deepen appreciation for the stereophonic approach to truth” that Pope John Paul II suggests in the reference in *Fides et Ratio* to faith and reason as “the two wings” of Catholic thought (Foster & Koterski, 2003, p. ix). These 10 essays on *Fides et Ratio* combine by dividing: understanding each wing’s operation by itself allows a firmer grasp of how they work together to allow a tradition to take flight.

The book has three parts. Section 1 addresses the doctrinal ramifications and developments occasioned by the pope’s encyclical as they pertain to the possibility of a Christian philosophy, the fate of metaphysics, theological anthropology and our understanding of the person, and the role of Mary and the effects of a Marian framework in an encyclical devoted to faith and reason. Section 2 concerns implications and applications of *Fides et Ratio* to Catholic higher education and to contemporary culture. Section 3 puts the encyclical into historical context by discussing the role of wisdom literature, medieval philosophy and theology, contemporary philosophy, and the Church’s own teaching from Vatican I to John Paul II. A useful summary outline of *Fides et Ratio* follows the third part.

The real contribution of *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought* is to convey very effectively – better than the encyclical itself does – just why *Fides et Ratio* ultimately matters inside the Church and for important issues in wider culture. Despite appearances in both tone and texture, it turns out that John Paul II’s analysis of the two wings of Catholic thought has wider appeal than only to theological ornithologists with advanced degrees. Instead, this volume ably demonstrates how *Fides et Ratio* speaks to the birdwatcher inside every child of God.

Faith. Both of the editors in their respective essays point to the irony of a

pope defending the claims of reason. But what John Paul II is doing in this encyclical is a rearguard defense of faith and revelation through a strategy of bolstering reason. How? Koterski shows how one does not defend faith by attacking the claims of reason. Rather, only by defending the claims and power of reason does one truly shore up the faith. As John Paul II shows, faith without any rational component can easily degenerate into feelings or superstition. A fideism which divorces reason from faith is first cousin to gullibility; and gullibility in our era of increasing religious violence is, literally, deadly. Moreover, feelings and faith based only as far as personal experience runs will obviously be different for every individual. Faith that is either emotionally or propositionally different for every individual is simply not sturdy enough to accommodate the claims of Christianity toward universal truth. In this way, an enervated philosophy, which also denies the possibility of universal truth, only complements a flimsy faith. Instead, a robust confidence in universal truth (which in our day is attacked by postmodernisms of various stripes mentioned in the encyclical) puts the claims of faith on firmer footing. As John Paul II says in *Fides et Ratio*, “theology needs philosophy as a partner in dialogue in order to confirm the intelligibility and universal truth of its claims” (1998, §77).

Faithfulness. The problem that this encyclical identifies is that philosophy in our day is effectively moving in reverse. It has lost faith in itself and its historic calling to pursue truth and meaning. Nothing better shows the hermeneutical circle at work in the operations of faith and reason than this very point: a commitment to the power of reason to know what is transcendent (or the lack of such a commitment) must act as a presupposition to philosophical inquiry and never as a conclusion that philosophical inquiry could itself reach without horribly begging the question along the way. John Paul II speaks of “attitudes of widespread distrust of the human being’s great capacity for knowledge” (1998, §5). These attitudes disparage not only philosophy, but also the human person. Allen, in the essay “Person and Complementarity in *Fides et Ratio*” calls appropriate attention to John Paul II’s personalism. What can be known is less important in this encyclical than who knows it. A theological anthropology is subtext to the entire encyclical, occasionally rising to the surface as when John Paul “define[s] the human being” as “the one who seeks the truth” (§28). That’s why nihilism, for example, is “a denial of the humanity and of the very identity of the human being” (§90). In short, philosophy damages more than itself when it retreats from its highest aspirations. It leaves muddy footprints all over the pope’s image of authentic humanity.

Justice. Not surprisingly, Koterski also situates *Fides et Ratio* in the tradi-

tion of papal social encyclicals. The Church social tradition rests firmly on the notion that each individual has a unique and inestimable human dignity. Absent that truth and you imperil social relations. There would then be no rights that all persons deserve in virtue of being persons. There could then be no true democracy, for John Paul II has repeatedly shown in various writings that democracy can only be sustained on a foundation where the people are protected from assaults on their most basic human dignity. “Metaphysics,” says John Paul II, “makes it possible to ground the concept of personal dignity in virtue of their spiritual nature” (1998, §83). “Objective truth,” says the pope, is “the very ground of human dignity” (§90). Attacking objective truth attacks human dignity, which leads to a “destructive will to power” (§90) that cancels out freedom and robs humanity of the hope for fullness of life. Desiring freedom, we imprison ourselves. It is an old story with echoes in the first garden of creation. Thus says the pope, “Once the truth is denied to human beings, it is pure illusion to try to set them free” (§90).

Education. If there is no truth, then there is literally nothing to discuss, pursue as a goal, argue about, sharpen insights in the service of, and so on. This reduces education to indoctrination and makes any attempt to advance a conversation into a power play with built-in advantage to the side with the most resources, loudest voice, or social leverage.

Freedom of Conscience. To say, as the pope does, that we are made to “seek” the truth implies that it is not simply handed to us. Activity is required, and activity which is a true search implies a sifting of various alternatives to yield forward movement. For this reason, in his essay on the implications of *Fides et Ratio* for Catholic universities, Foster sees in this encyclical an endorsement of academic freedom that supplements “the paucity of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*’s treatment” (Foster & Koterski, 2003, p. 115). A shared pursuit of the truth requires a shared commitment to authentic dialogue, for truth is discovered by a pilgrim Church in unfettered conversation with other sincere seekers. Foster puts it helpfully concluding, “without truth there is no freedom” (p. 119). Even John Paul II states, “Truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery” (1998, §90). One might well extend this point to apply to the relationship between theologians and the magisterium. Clearly, this is an application of Foster’s point that would be heavily at odds with *Fides et Ratio*. But if so, there is an internal tension in this encyclical that calls for further inquiry.

One of the more intriguing narrative reconstructions of the relationship between philosophy and theology is found in Quinn’s essay “Infides et Unratio: Modern Philosophy and the Papal Encyclical.” Quinn’s point is that because of onerous ecclesial or civil sanctions (or both), philosophers could

not mount a frontal assault on the claims of theology. So they did the next best thing. They attacked philosophy itself in what Quinn referred to as “civil war” (Foster & Koterski, 2003, p. 181). Namely, they called into question the Aristotelianism that undergirded various syntheses between Athens and Jerusalem. Even more specifically, the Aristotelian notion of final causality was attacked. That was a ripe target for philosophical barbs because it seemed to smuggle in all sorts of notions of purposeful governance and cosmic plan. Of course, once the plan is impugned, so too the planner.

As would certainly be expected, a volume containing 10 original essays by eight different authors (including both of the editors) will vary both in quality and applicability to the central purpose of this work as described above. Koterski’s second essay in the book, for example, delves so deeply into wisdom literature that it ultimately slights the use that *Fides et Ratio* makes of it, and could, with the excising of about a dozen of its more than 30 pages, just as well stand unaided in a separate volume on the Hebrew Scriptures.

Koterski’s second essay was as extended as Michael Sweeney’s on “The Medievalism of *Fides et Ratio*” was truncated. Thomas Aquinas surely has a special place in *Fides et Ratio*, but John Paul II quite deliberately did not go as far as Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris* in commending Thomism as the Church’s philosophy. “The Church,” says John Paul II, “has no philosophy of her own, nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others” (1998, §49). The reason for this less-than-full embrace might lie in the pope’s own eclectic philosophical training, which was certainly broader than neo-scholasticism. Cardinal Dulles hints at this in the closing essay to the volume on “Faith and Reason: From Vatican I to John Paul II.” Nonetheless, there is a fuller story to be told here than is found in the present book. It would be an especially interesting tale because many theologians writing today who are self-consciously reclaiming Thomistic themes and approaches are battling the same philosophical foes that John Paul II is in *Fides et Ratio*. His chief allies are not phenomenologists or personalists, but Thomists of various stripes.

A heavier editorial hand might also have asserted itself to minimize the number of times that the same quotations from *Fides et Ratio* are taken up by different authors in this volume for essentially the same commentary. Perhaps some may appreciate the repetition across essays, but this reviewer found it distracting.

Still others may rightly wonder why only one of the authors is female. In a tradition which has repeatedly characterized women as the seat of emotion rather than of intellect or rationality, a dearth of female voices in a discussion of faith and reason might, sadly, be just what one would expect. The chapter on Mary, written by a Jesuit, is an interesting contribution and poten-

tial corrective to the repeated equating of the male with the rational. And, indeed, there is a real richness in the comparison between Mary's assent to the angel, which was at one and the same time a forceful fiat combined with the greatest humility, and the role of philosophy to assert its fullest self while remaining conscious of its own limitations. But certainly, despite models of Lady Wisdom in Scripture and Lady Philosophy in Boethius, the Catholic tradition would both benefit from and survive deeper and more potentially painful introspection on how it has repeatedly and regrettably gendered rationality as a predominantly male trait.

REFERENCES

- Foster, D. R., & Koterski, J. W. (Eds.). (2003). *The two wings of Catholic thought: Essays on Fides et ratio*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
 John Paul II. (1998). *Fides et ratio*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

Joseph M. Incandela is a professor of religious studies at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana.

SCRIPTURE ON THE SILVER SCREEN

ADELE REINHARTZ
 WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS, 2003
 \$24.95, 256 pages

Reviewed by Ann O. Alokolaro

Even educators in a Catholic school can find it challenging to engage students in a conversation concerning religion or the Bible. Teaching young people today can seem counter-cultural when competing against lessons taught on television, on the radio, and in movies. The Bible does not always seem applicable to today's world and the lives of young people. Thus, educators use creative ways to entice young minds to see a purpose in reading the Bible and learning about its teachings. Adele Reinhartz of McMaster University has discovered a way to engage students by meeting them where