# The Philosophical Significance of *Fides et Ratio*

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## Introduction

Most people in the modern world have lost fascination with and respect for philosophers and their work: many scientists, politicians, lawyers, doctors, laypeople and even some clergy would not be able to say what philosophy is, who the major philosophers are, or what are the most influential philosophical arguments and theories. This change has not, however, been accompanied by ordinary people or other disciplines taking over the philosopher's tasks of searching for the meaning of existence and subjecting the arguments of others to rigorous scrutiny; in other words, not only respect for professional philosophy, but also the very inclination to philosophise are losing their place in the modern world. And, arguably, this is partly the fault of philosophers themselves. *Fides et Ratio* is addressed to the Bishops; it asks them to reawaken a sense of philosophical enquiry in their peoples, to encourage knowledge of and respect for professional philosophy, and to urge philosophers and philosophy teachers to return to philosophy which satisfies people's need for clear answers, a sense of purpose and a coherent basis for Christianity.

This Encyclical's title is 'On the Relationship Between Faith and Reason', but there is a third fellow in the background: truth. Truth is constantly alluded to as the reason for producing an Encyclical on philosophy at this time: truth is under attack —not just the truths of the faith, but the idea of there being such a thing as truth at all. Public attacks on truth most often take the form of attacks on *moral* judgements and theories, especially those which include some absolute claims; thus the Pope's major Encyclical on truth ('The Splendor of Truth'), also addressed to the Bishops, is a document concerning *moral* theory

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and decision-making. However, he obviously believes that the relativist and postmodernist thinking behind attacks on Catholic moral theory is the product of a more fundamental philosophical trend and of a general downgrading of the intellectual life∫difficulties which affect many seminaries. Thus he restates the need for the intellectual life, for the kind of philosophy which is committed to truth, and for the personal humility which is at the heart of academic work and study.

## One

It must be said that, unlike *Veritatis Splendor*, this Encyclical does not consist in sustained philosophical argument; it is an Encyclical about philosophy, rather than a contribution to professional philosophy *per se*, though it does have much to teach the profession. It raises many questions, and does not pretend to great originality in its answers but rather asks the Bishops to recall all philosophers to their purpose and to remind Catholic philosophers and theologians of some of their duties.

The first of many puzzles occurs in the opening sentence: 'Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth' [Introduction]. This simile implies that faith and reason are two quite distinct human activities and that their functions are complementary, balanced, like the equally balanced wings of a bird. However, we must be careful of over-stating their distinctiveness and misunderstanding their complementarity.

An adult faith requires and responds to reasoning, it cannot be analysed *independently* of reason∫we cannot recognise or accept propositions of faith without some minimum intellectual grasp of their premises, or without the context of pre-existing information into which they fit and from which they get their sense; or, importantly, without the sort of critical understanding of the propositions which means we can *go on* from them, building them into the rest of our thought and action. We might also argue that without faith, there is no reasoning: after all, every true proposition and sound argument requires some minimum faith∫some acceptance of what has not yet, or not fully, been proved, some acceptance of the word and the researches of others [32]. It may not be possible to argue that this is specifically *religious* faith, but we can certainly argue that sound reasoning requires a whole series of acts of trust —acts of faith, as well as of hope and love— before it can proceed.

Just as faith and reason cannot be independently analysed, they cannot be treated as two halves that make up one whole: they do not really have the balanced function of a pair of wings. For one thing, being rational, possessing a rational soul, is prior to having faith: the gift of faith cannot be grafted on to trees, sheep or just anything. For another, although faith and reason share the goal of truth, faith pursues truth by considering reality through the data of revelation, while reason simply consider reality. To the non-believer, of course, this often seems a limitation of faith: it regards the world exclusively through the fixed and constant object of revelation; to the believer, however, this makes faith the grander and more extensive enterprise: it seeks truth not just from the starting points of human experience but from a synthesis of human experience with the perspective of the Gospel. What is clear is that the logics of faith and reason are very different. A third point of difference is that it is a consequence of how reason functions that it enjoys a certain primacy: reason cannot be judged by anything other than itself, for judgement simply *is* exercise of reason; revelation, like anything else conceivable, is recognised in and judged by rational criteria.

However, rational thought is not an *end in itself*, but a path to truth; and, especially given the dark facts of original sin and the blunting of our rational skills, reason can misguide us and lead us to embrace falsehoods. Thus not only does faith need to be honest about its reliance on reason, reason, if it is to achieve its goal, also needs correction by faith. The Pope does not solve the philosophical problem over how to state the relationship between faith and reason in *Fides et Ratio*, but his text does bring together many important analyses of the operations of that relationship.

## Two

The early part of the Encyclical considers truth in general. The Pope confirms that there is a natural and inevitable human desire to know truth, and ultimately the truth about God, 'so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves' [*Introduction*]. The claim here —that the goal of knowing God is to know the truth about oneself— is unusual in today's world, but important: full knowledge of the truth about God is not just possession of a sound theological theory but enjoyment of a relationship with the Trinity, ultimately the experience of eternal, blessed life; and this

is, of course, the final truth about human beings, a truth with very immediate implications for one's sense of identity, relationships and activities.

It is important here to notice that the Church does not serve Christian truth only, credal truth, or even just religious truth; [2] in its *diakonia*, its service of the truth, the Church is a partner with the rest of humanity and a voice for truth in general. This search for truth is as old as our race; that is, it began when rational beings first emerged from animals. It is expressed in a sense of wonder before Creation which leads us to strong curiosity about our own lives and the world we live in. All philosophising begins with this experience of wonder and this restless curiosity [4]. These are not experiences unique to philosophy students: every human life is involved with philosophical *enquiry*, even though few of us are charged with constructing and studying philosophical *systems* [4]. As the Pope argued in *Veritatis Splendor* [7], the young man who asked Christ what to do to get eternal life was not asking for a philosophical system or theory, but he was involved in a truly philosophical quest, searching for 'the full meaning of life'.

This needs to be underlined. Very often people ask 'why study philosophy?' Some say 'for its own sake', others 'because it can help with other things'; the truth is more complicated. We study philosophy because philosophical *enquiry* is something none of us can avoid and studying *systematically* what we cannot avoid both has interest in itself and is extremely useful for our lives and choices. When we study philosophy we create or consider philosophical systems: rigorous, logically coherent bodies of knowledge in which we summarise our thoughts about such things as life's overarching meaning, the structure of argument, our capacity to know truth, the structure of reality and the purposes of action. These philosophical systems are deeply important, as the Pope wants everyone to realise, but more important still is the urge to philosophical enquiry which the systems serve; philosophical arguments are neither an ivory-tower indulgence, nor just a useful moral, political or therapeutic tool: they are powerful, systematic attempts to establish and clarify the expressions of philosophical urges that are natural to us.

One of the leading ideas in *Fides et Ratio* is that the systems which professional philosophers construct often show forgetfulness or ignorance of philosophy's source in the sense of wonder and the passionate yearning for truth and life's deeper meaning that is found in all

men. Now, if philosophical systems fail to answer human beings' genuine enquiries, this is a problem with *philosophy*, not a problem with human beings. Genuine philosophy is not a form of gnosticism, secret and impenetrable mystery —though some think it is: consider the technicalities of some analytic writers, the lofty-minded attitude of some armchair dons, the mind-numbing jargon of some critical theorists and radical postmodernists, the heart-numbing arrogance of those, like Australian utilitarian Peter Singer, who pride themselves on following the argument 'wherever it goes', ignoring ordinary sensitivities or insisting that they be changed.

How do we avoid philosophical *systems* detaching themselves from philosophical *enquiry*, rational thought detaching itself from wonder and the human need for life-enhancing answers? The Pope replies: by professional philosophers and philosophy teachers noting that while 'every people has its own native and seminal wisdom' [3], these cultural and local philosophies share an unchanging core, an 'implicit philosophy' found in all cultures. If they do not acknowledge this, they will not survive —except perhaps as temporary fashions or as forms of thought suppression. This 'core' includes the principle of non-contradiction, principles of teleology and natural causality, the concept of the person as free and intelligent, certain fundamental moral norms etc.— principles lodged in the structure of rational thought itself. All philosophical systems must conform to these.

But how does this fit with the freedom of philosophers to speculate by their own principles and methodologies and freely to construct systems of thought for their own purposes? How does it fit with the *autonomy* of the scholarly enquiries of professional philosophers, an autonomy which the Pope believes should be supported and strengthened [75]? Is the Pope not, in fact, restricting philosophy to a narrow paradigm, a traditional, Greek and Latin-based western system which happens to serve his particular theological opinions and ecclesio-political strategies? I think not.

By the 'autonomy of philosophy' is meant the capacity of philosophy to give answers solely by the principles and methodologies of philosophy, employing nothing other than the power of reason [75], ie philosophy's autonomy is the freedom of persons to think in a certain, particular way and to have their thoughts responded to in those terms. In *Veritatis Splendor* [35-42] John Paul argued that the autonomy of persons is never unlimited —never freedom to create our own values,

to determine what is truth— but rather freedom to choose to live by God's law, or to reject it. Where we reject it, we suffer from, or give in to, the disproportionate force of sub-rational factors over us: passions, weakness, apathy, confusion, distraction, cultural factors or particular individuals; thus we squander our freedom and embrace external control and self-limitation (cf *Veritatis Splendor*, 32).

With this in mind, we might interpret the autonomy of philosophy in this way: philosophy which is not inappropriately influenced by external factors (such as ideologies, emotional commitments, partial, out-dated or rationally indefensible theories) respects the independence of human thought and can be developed without appeal to any rules other than those rationality itself suggests and those appropriately derived from them. Such true philosophies are autonomous in the sense that they can give answers without appealing to the principles or methods of external disciplines; thus they ought to be respected and responded to in their own terms.

Now, various schools and systems that pass for philosophy in the academy are not by this standard genuinely *philosophical*, for to be 'a philosophy' a system must be free from inappropriate influences and must recognise and respond to the universal human inclinations to wonder and to enquire passionately after truth.

What does a genuine philosophical system, one which does respect the autonomy of human thought, look like? First, it will acknowledge certain basic principles which are *necessary* requirements if reason is to produce systems with anything to say to people at all. For example, if your philosophy does not accept *the principle of non-contradiction* you cannot state or accept propositions, therefore you cannot satisfy enquirers and answer their yearning to grasp life's meaning; if you do not accept that persons are *free and intelligent*, you have no reason at all to debate with them or try to inform them, and you cannot understand anything they say or do as significant; if you do not accept principles of *teleology and causality*, your philosophical system cannot assume regularity in the world or in human affairs and so cannot give counsel; if you do not accept *fundamental moral norms*, you would not be taking others' enquiries seriously or pursuing answers to them with diligent regard for the truth. In other words, true philosophy will respect the core principles of philosophical thought, the 'implicit philosophy', mentioned earlier. Remove this 'common human inheritance', and we are no longer using reason to serve the natural hu-

man desire to know truth and find meaning; we are no longer producing real philosophy, humanly important speculation, but, at best, entertaining fellow professional philosophers, and perhaps at worst, supporting some corrupting ideological position.

We cannot respect such poor philosophy as 'autonomous thinking' for it is limited by the external demands or special interests of particular groups or points of view. Philosophy is autonomous only in the sense that human beings are capable of the difficult task of reflecting in accord with the standards internal to rational thought, following the principles necessarily presumed in any rational human communication.

## Three

But the content of philosophy must consist in more than just fundamental principles if it is to provide answers to real, human questions and support and uplift human lives. I will say something of the substance of philosophical discourse later; but first, note that *Fides et Ratio* makes clear that philosophy's substantive content is not derived from *religion* in any straightforward way. Indeed, it presents excellent arguments for the independence of philosophy from religion. I will briefly mention three of these arguments from Scripture, intellectual history and doctrine.

In the Wisdom literature we read of the need for reason and intelligence in a happy life [16]: there is no such thing as 'true happiness through faith alone'. Elsewhere in the Old Testament God's revelation is not an abolition of reason but the cause of the Israelites grasping rationally all that reason by itself could not disclose. In the New Testament St Paul describes how the Crucifixion of God's Son challenges reason to realise that not everything can be made intelligible in its own terms: that God should be killed and offered up to God is senseless from reason's perspective. Again, this is not the elimination of reason but its *gain*: [23] Christ crucified and risen completely realigns the relation between faith and philosophy; it is the reef beyond which they 'set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth.' So Scripture supports the dignity, independence and importance of rational thought; faith does not replace reason any more than grace replaces nature. Philosophical enquiry has independent value because *rational thought is an indispensable part of happiness for every human being, whether he has religious faith or not.*

Christian intellectual history also upholds the independence of philosophy. From its very beginnings Christianity was involved with philosophy as a means of understanding and communicating its truths. Christianity developed not as a closed-minded, fundamentalist religion but one which sought not only to convert hearts by God's grace and Christian witness, but also to persuade minds with a rational account of God, creation, salvation and morality [38]. The Greek philosophical tradition mined by Christian writers from St Paul onwards was the necessary means to early Christians purifying the concept of God of mythological elements: 'superstitions were recognised for what they were and religion was, at least in part, purified by rational analysis' [36]. [5] Philosophical enquiry has independent value because *rational thought is our sole means of understanding, judging and communicating—even revelation.*

This process of absorbing and utilising philosophy was not a crude and pragmatic use of philosophical concepts gathered eclectically from the various systems of the Mediterranean world which the early Church just happened to be living in; nor was it the official adoption by the Church of a single philosophical system; rather, it was a lively dialogue in which over time the harmony between Christian faith and any true philosophy was demonstrated. However, we should recall that, unlike merely human institutions, the Church is not simply 'another player' in 'multi-ethnic' debates: the Church, we believe, is a timeless and sacred society in which the worldviews of all who sincerely and intelligently seek the truth can be heard, considered, purified and reconciled. Thus the early Church's meeting with non-Christian philosophies was not simply the addition of a new worldview, but the Christianising of the intellectual life and of intellectual dialogue as vital parts of the good human life (it was, of course, pre-figured by Socrates and Aristotle).

In a sense, this is what the Pope means when he insists that as a matter of doctrine the Church does not officially adopt any *one* philosophical system as the definitive truth—'the Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonise any one particular philosophy in preference to others' [49]; it is the freedom and authority of the intellectual life *per se* that the Church is interested in, and not one, particular intellectual system. This is so for at least two reasons. First, there is the negative point that reason, like all human faculties, is finite and is deeply wounded by the Fall, so no single rational system can be relied upon to give the full and complete truth. Secondly, and more positively, reason functions well only if the thinker believes himself to be

freely directing his thoughts for himself and if those thoughts are allowed to move freely, constructing philosophy solely in accord with the principles of logic and evidence, and the demands of reality [49]. Thus it would be wrong, as well as fruitless, for the Church to dictate any particular system of thought to people's reason: the Church is deeply interested in the philosophical enterprise just because she is confident that, left to itself, human intelligence will make judgements that support and confirm the path the Church herself recommends to human salvation. Philosophical enquiry has independent value because *rational thought has its own motivation and principles, and takes place through debates and arguments which can help people deepen and understand their faith, precisely because they do not presuppose that faith.*

Let me elaborate the point that the Church does not interfere with rational judgement or affirm any one philosophy as the whole truth. She does, of course, guide the faithful away from philosophies incompatible with Catholic faith, and she makes great use of certain philosophical theories and arguments to explain and teach the faith. Given this, it may be a little hard to accept that she has *no* official or preferred philosophy: surely, the Pope himself is a top-notch philosopher whose writings contain many pieces of fine philosophy from one particular school; and surely he, and other Church authorities, have expounded, developed and recommended some philosophy, eg Aquinas's, over all others —do the Pope's recent Encyclicals not form a series of commentaries upon and applications of a personalist form of Thomist philosophy?

Here, we should recall that for philosophy to be genuinely philosophical it must acknowledge those fundamental principles which form the common philosophical inheritance of humanity. This vision of philosophy inspires the Pope to call on philosophers to recover above all else the 'sapiential' or ethical, the epistemological and the metaphysical dimensions of their discipline [81-83]— and, of course, attention to these three dimensions and their interrelationships is precisely what characterises the philosophy of Aquinas and distinguishes it from so many other Christian intellectual systems. In Aquinas's philosophy too the core fundamental truths are even more transparent and systematised than they are even in Aristotle. His system is unsurpassed in providing dialogue with earlier and secular thinkers who clarify that core while also providing detailed moral and spiritual insights into human experience, and an epistemology and metaphysics which are bedrocks for Christian realist philosophy.

The Pope recommends Aquinas's thought above all others [78] not as a dogmatic assertion about what is good philosophy and what is not, but because he believes Aquinas's system is unique in showing how we can recognise the common philosophical inheritance while also tackling everyday problems of the meaning of life, distinguishing knowledge from illusion and providing genuinely informative answers to metaphysical questions about God, our selves and the Universe. And of course, like Aquinas, the Pope does not believe we can do successful philosophy without dialogue with other philosophical and cultural systems and traditions. Aquinas's philosophy recognises what all human beings really *need* from philosophy, partly because of its acceptance and use of the transcultural philosophical inheritance, but also partly because of its dialogue with other secular and popular philosophies. Aquinas has not said all that needs to be or can be said. There are good Thomist principles for developing and applying his thinking by dialogue with and learning from other schools of thought; it is when Thomism has tended towards simple exposition of texts that it has ceased to feature in large-scale public debate; obviously, textual criticism that does not encounter live, philosophical criticism will revert to history of philosophy.

I will say something about philosophical dialogue, before concluding with some remarks on cultural exchange.

## Four

Universities such as Santo Tomas, Manila, have succeeded in keeping the ideas and tradition of Thomism alive while many other schools have developed and publicised other philosophies. However, in the last fifteen to twenty years analytic philosophers in the UK, United States and elsewhere, most of them working at secular universities and writing in secular publications, have begun to rediscover Aquinas and his ideas —in most cases as a result of the great 1970s rediscovery of Aristotle's works. Mainstream philosophy journals now devote whole sections or even editions to Aquinas, with thinkers such as John Haldane, Norman Kretzmann, Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert George, John Finnis, Tim Williamson, Hilary Putnan, David Lewis playing different, but vital, roles in the re-evaluation. Thomist universities have now been vindicated and the thinking of Aquinas is part of mainstream philosophy once again.

This means that in praising Aquinas's philosophy above all oth-

ers John Paul has revealed himself as not only a traditionalist but also at the forefront of modern secular philosophy —something no other modern Pope could claim. In ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, theory of mind, philosophy of science and aesthetics it is now clear that there is a significant, new voice which all professional philosophers must take seriously: the analytic Thomist.

Dialogue with opposing schemes of thought, synthesis with the best aspects of alternatives, has always been the good Thomist's way. What does analytic thought have to offer Thomists? I will mention two things. First, it is generally anti-idealist, and so (despite occasional transcendentalist turns) is Thomism. In fact, Thomistic realism means we may expect to see a number of strange partnerships develop in coming years: with the feminists and environmentalists we take the body and nature seriously, with the Kantians we believe in virtue, freedom grounded on moral law, and moral absolutes, and with many analytic philosophers we believe in natural kinds, objective knowledge, rational principles and ethical cognitivism.

A second worthwhile feature of analytic thought is its respect for faithful interpretation of texts on the one hand and application of ideas to contemporary problems on the other —something which also represents Thomism at its best. Aquinas's own thought jumps off from the required reading of the day and the new texts of Aristotle, and with these he debates such burning issues of the thirteenth century as the eternity of the world, the nature of the intellect and the relation of philosophy to doctrine; his followers too have read his texts with scrupulous care while contributing to the solution of problems extending from medieval debates over voluntarism and nominalism to modern debates over war and euthanasia.

However, we must acknowledge too that religious thought is often unwelcome in the secular academy. If a serious dialogue is to be attempted, analytic philosophers must try to understand the nature of revelation and the relation of faith to reason, doctrine to philosophy, so that they can respect the Thomistic enterprise as a whole. *Fides et Ratio* may be helpful here. Modern Catholic philosophy has often demonstrated low intellectual standards, and many Catholic philosophers themselves require to be retrained in what it is that we do and do not believe; too often they are left with the impression that faith is a matter of irrational and incommunicable 'personal belief' or a mere 'underpinning narrative' of the *real* philosophy.

## Five

The Pope also has encouragement for Asian, African and other thought systems, ideas visited by him before in *Veritatis Splendor* and *Centessimus Annus*. The first paragraph of *Fides et Ratio* states: 'In both East and West, we may trace a journey which has led humanity down the centuries to meet and engage truth more and more deeply.' And the Pope is not limiting his vision to eastern and western *Christendom*: he goes on to claim that '*every* people has its own native and seminal wisdom, which, as a true cultural treasure, tends to find voice and develop in forms which are genuinely philosophical.' [3] Just as all human beings tend towards philosophical enquiry, the search for wisdom, all cultures too tend towards wisdom; and cultures which survive and flourish express and develop this 'folk-wisdom' in philosophical systems, often associated with their legal, political and economic thinking.

We are born into a culture, and, particularly early in life, entrust ourselves to those within it who know what we do not, accepting from them what we cannot yet prove for ourselves. Thus culture is a necessary part of human experience in which the need to entrust ourselves to others is extended from the family to the wider circle. Christians should not be afraid of this experience of living and growing in cultures, even cultures that are not specifically or predominantly Christian. Christianity from its beginnings met, merged with, drew on and in turn affected other cultures —most obviously, Hebrew and Greco-Roman cultures. And this is inevitable with a genuinely universal, public religion: it only works by meeting new cultures and forging links, often controversial links, or links with unlikely-looking partners [70-71].

The Pope is clearly interested here in the encounter with non-European systems of thought; he particularly mentions Indian, Chinese, Japanese, other Asian and traditional African cultures. He believes Christians in these regions have a duty to draw from their heritage elements compatible with faith so as to enrich their Christian faith and that of the wider Church. Now, the Pope has not gone crazy; this is not the advocacy of 'free thought' or 'cultural relativism'. In *Veritatis Splendor*, a document he described as presenting for the first time the principles for pastoral discernment necessary in complex cultural situation, he wrote: 'It must clearly be admitted that man always exists in a particular culture, but it must also be admitted that *man is not exhaustively defined* by that same culture. Moreover, the very progress

of cultures demonstrates that there is something in man which *transcends* these cultures' [53], ie there are standards by which cultures can be criticised, and this too is the work of philosophers. For example, in *Fides et Ratio* [72] the Pope points out that exploring cultures must not deny universal human needs, the perennial philosophical heritage, or the tradition of Greco-Latin philosophical and theological reflection which is so much a part of the Church's life; also, cultural thinking must not become 'closed in its differences' and affirm itself while ignoring other traditions.

Nevertheless, there is a strong programme for cultural exploration and integration here —integration, not a random mish-mash or insensitively forcing local norms onto complex theological, liturgical and pastoral structures. We need to be clear about what this amounts to: certainly, the Pope does not believe that the Greco-Latin system of thought is a universal meta-cultural standard; at the same time he is not a relativist —he does not believe that philosophies and systems of thought have value just because they support or are prevalent or popular within a culture; what he is arguing for is a particular position midway between these views. According to this position, Christians in Asian, African and other cultures are encouraged to enter their cultural values and practices into dialogue with traditional Christian systems since their cultures already possess the truth, and they and the whole Church may benefit from hearing Christian truths expressed in new concepts and symbols. But if there is any suggestion that what is expressed here is not Christian but the product of some non-Christian value-system which is being forged onto or merged with Christian faith, then that form of expression has no role in the Church's life.

No one system of thought has a monopoly on truth: the basic truths —the perennial truths of philosophy and the doctrines of faith were manifested from the beginnings of the Church's history in vastly different cultures, and as long as it is these basic truths that are manifested, we ought to welcome and explore local variations. However, as I say, there are dangers of relativism here: one cannot simply look for an attractive cultural presentation of the liturgy or a popular lifestyle and say 'this is how we express that particular truth here'. For Catholics, the physical and social expression of ideas is part of the meaning of ideas, and these expressions can generally only be changed if the central ideas themselves are changed or developed; hence, presumably, the need for the Bishops and the unity of their communion with Rome to ensure that our changing habits are genuine expressions

of Catholic and universal ideas, and not arbitrary or personal rearrangements of tradition. I n my country the Mass already often looks more like a folk-dance than a sacred and timeless sacrifice, and this, I think, is simply cultural vandalism and impiety.

In *Veritatis Splendor* [eg 53, 96, 97] the Pope gave some hint of what degree of change and novelty is permissible and what is not, at least in the field of moral life; he does this by reminding us of some of the natural law teaching of Aquinas. You recall that at the first level of natural law we understand certain objects of human orientation or 'natural inclination' as worth pursuing. The objects of this practical understanding are good things common to all cultures, things 'capable of ceaselessly expressing their historical relevance' (*Veritatis Splendor*, 53): unless people are being facetious, ignorant or absurd, all will agree that health, truth, friendship, integrity, work etc are always worth pursuing and of irreducible value. These are aspects of 'human nature', which, the Pope believes, ensures our personal dignity and that we do not become 'the prisoner of any of our cultures' (*Veritatis Splendor*, 53). This, of course, is quite compatible with the fact that since different individuals develop intellectually and in other ways at different rates, people may grasp the worthwhileness of different goods with different intensities and degrees of clarity.

At the second level of natural law we recognise upon further reflection certain secondary, moral principles by which reasonable persons pursue these humanly important goods. These moral principles too are common to all cultures[though different times and circumstances may well mean different priorities and so different levels of clarity about moral principles. These principles are the foundations of just and peaceful coexistence between very different types of human societies; they are also the safeguard of democracy which requires the acknowledgment of the values which these principles underpin, such as equality, and common rights and duties (*Veritatis Splendor* 96).

At the third level of natural law we begin to meet some real cultural particularity. This is the level at which reasonable persons who are morally and politically aware —persons aware of secondary, moral principles[create and communicate the specific norms in terms of which they intend to run their lives and contribute to their cultures (cf *Veritatis Splendor* 97). This level does demonstrate considerable cultural variation and development in the light of historical circumstances; though culture can subtract nothing from the previous two levels, it can add

and subtract at this third level. Different cultures will develop different ways of following (universal) moral principles. For example, we all agree there is a principle and virtue of special respect for elders and grandparents, but this duty will be very differently fulfilled in Philippines, Scotland, Alaska and Greece.

Part, then, of what the Pope is arguing is that when we explore the implications of moral principles for moral life and religious practice we should do so with sensitivity towards local histories and openness towards cultural habits. We all accept the basic moral principles and virtues of justice, respect, mercy, piety etc., but the *practices* of justice, mercy, respect, piety may be very different in our different countries, and this difference should be understood and respected.

## Conclusion

The modern world shrinks from rigorous argument and reliance on the powers of reason alone, yet at the same time, paradoxically, people continue to cry out for the meaning of human existence, to question the verification of the human capacity to know, and to seek answers that are reliable, firm and transcend our individual weaknesses. These basic human responses require philosophy: the practice of ethical, epistemological and metaphysical reflection. We can do philosophy without going to University or seminary and studying it formally; but those who do work in Universities and seminaries have the responsibility to cherish and to develop sound philosophy. Because where the systems of philosophers do not command attention, the human need to let the mind soar in contemplation and to press on ceaselessly towards the truth will not be recognised and respected. ❑