



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO REVEREND GEORGE V. COYNE, S.J.
DIRECTOR OF THE VATICAN OBSERVATORY**

*To the Reverend George V. Coyne SJ
Director of the Vatican Observatory*

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Eph.* 1, 2).

As you prepare to publish the papers presented at the Study Week held at Castel Gandolfo on 21-26 September 1987, I take the occasion to express my gratitude to you and through you to all who contributed to that important initiative. I am confident that the publication of these papers will ensure that the fruits of that endeavour will be further enriched.

The three hundredth anniversary of the publication of Newton’s *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* provided an appropriate occasion for the Holy See to sponsor a Study Week that investigated the multiple relationships among theology, philosophy and the natural sciences. The man so honoured, Sir Isaac Newton, had himself devoted much of his life to these same issues, and his reflections upon them can be found throughout his major works, his unfinished manuscripts and his vast correspondence. The publication of your own papers from this Study Week, taking up again some of the same questions which this great genius explored, affords me the opportunity to thank you for the efforts you devoted to a subject of such paramount importance. The theme of your conference, “Our Knowledge of God and Nature: Physics, Philosophy and Theology”, is assuredly a crucial one for the contemporary world. Because of its importance, I should like to address some issues which the interactions among natural science, philosophy, and theology present to the Church and to human society in general.

The Church and the Academy engage one another as two very different but major institutions within human civilization and world culture. We bear before God enormous responsibilities for the human condition because historically we have had and continue to have a major influence on the

development of ideas and values and on the course of human action. We both have histories stretching back over thousands of years: the learned, academic community dating back to the origins of culture, to the city and the library and the school, and the Church with her historical roots in ancient Israel. We have come into contact often during these centuries, sometimes in mutual support, at other times in those needless conflicts which have marred both our histories. In your conference we met again, and it was altogether fitting that as we approach the close of this millennium we initiated a series of reflections together upon the world as we touch it and as it shapes and challenges our actions.

So much of our world seems to be in fragments, in disjointed pieces. So much of human life is passed in isolation or in hostility. The division between rich nations and poor nations continues to grow; the contrast between northern and southern regions of our planet becomes ever more marked and intolerable. The antagonism between races and religions splits countries into warring camps; historical animosities show no signs of abating. Even within the academic community, the separation between truth and values persists, and the isolation of their several cultures – scientific, humanistic and religious – makes common discourse difficult if not at times impossible.

But at the same time we see in large sectors of the human community a growing critical openness towards people of different cultures and backgrounds, different competencies and viewpoints. More and more frequently, people are seeking intellectual coherence and collaboration, and are discovering values and experiences they have in common even within their diversities. This openness, this dynamic interchange, is a notable feature of the international scientific communities themselves, and is based on common interests, common goals and a common enterprise, along with a deep awareness that the insights and attainments of one are often important for the progress of the other. In a similar but more subtle way this has occurred and is continuing to occur among more diverse group – among the communities that make up the Church, and even between the scientific community and the Church herself. This drive is essentially a movement towards the kind of unity which resist homogenization and relishes diversity. Such community is determined by a common meaning and by a shared understanding that evokes a sense of mutual involvement. Two groups which may seem initially to have nothing in common can begin to enter into community with one another by discovering a common goal, and this in turn can lead to broader areas of shared understanding and concern.

As never before in her history, the Church has entered into the movement for the union of all Christians, fostering common study, prayer, and discussions that “all may be one” (*Jo.* 17, 20). She has attempted to rid herself of every vestige of antisemitism and to emphasize her origins in and her religious debt to Judaism. In reflection and prayer, she has reached out to the great world religions, recognizing the values we all hold in common and our universal and utter dependence upon God.

Within the Church herself, there is a growing sense of “world church”, so much in evidence at the

last Ecumenical Council in which bishops native to every continent – no longer predominantly of European or even Western origin – assumed for the first time their common responsibility for the entire Church. The documents from that Council and of the magisterium have reflected this new world-consciousness both in their content and in their attempt to address all people of good will. During this century, we have witnessed a dynamic tendency to reconciliation and unity that has taken many forms within the Church.

Nor should such a development be surprising. The Christian community in moving so emphatically in this direction is realizing in greater intensity the activity of Christ within her: “For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (2Cor. 5, 19). We ourselves are called to be a continuation of the reconciliation of human beings, one with another and all with God. Our very nature as Church entails this commitment to unity.

Turning to the relationship between religion and science, there has been a definite, though still fragile and provisional, movement towards a new and more nuanced interchange. We have begun to talk to one another on deeper levels than before, and with greater openness towards one another’s perspectives. We have begun to search together for a more thorough understanding of one another’s disciplines, with their competencies and their limitations, and especially for areas of common ground. In doing so we have uncovered important questions which concern both of us, and which are vital to the larger human community we both serve. It is crucial that this common search based on critical openness and interchange should not only continue but also grow and deepen in its quality and scope.

For the impact each has, and will continue to have, on the course of civilization and on the world itself, cannot be overestimated, and there is so much that each can offer the other. There is, of course, the vision of the unity of all things and all peoples in Christ, who is active and present with us in our daily lives – in our struggles, our sufferings, our joys and in our searchings – and who is the focus of the Church’s life and witness. This vision carries with it into the larger community a deep reverence for all that is, a hope and assurance that the fragile goodness, beauty and life we see in the universe is moving towards a completion and fulfilment which will not be over-whelmed by the forces of dissolution and death. This vision also provides a strong support for the values which are emerging both from our knowledge and appreciation of creation and of ourselves as the products, knowers and stewards of creation.

The scientific disciplines too, as is obvious, are endowing us with an understanding and appreciation of our universe as a whole and of the incredibly rich variety of intricately related processes and structures which constitute its animate and inanimate components. This knowledge has given us a more thorough understanding of ourselves and of our humble yet unique role within creation. Through technology it also has given us the capacity to travel, to communicate, to build, to cure, and to probe in ways which would have been almost unimaginable to our ancestors. Such knowledge and power, as we have discovered, can be used greatly to enhance and improve our

lives or they can be exploited to diminish and destroy human life and the environment even on a global scale.

The unity we perceive in creation on the basis of our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord of the universe, and the correlative unity for which we strive in our human communities, seems to be reflected and even reinforced in what contemporary science is revealing to us. As we behold the incredible development of scientific research we detect an underlying movement towards the discovery of levels of law and process which unify created reality and which at the same time have given rise to the vast diversity of structures and organisms which constitute the physical and biological, and even the psychological and sociological, worlds.

Contemporary physics furnishes a striking example. The quest for the unification of all four fundamental physical forces – gravitation, electromagnetism, the strong and weak nuclear interactions – has met with increasing success. This unification may well combine discoveries from the sub-atomic and the cosmological domains and shed light both on the origin of the universe and, eventually, on the origin of the laws and constants which govern its evolution. Physicists possess a detailed though incomplete and provisional knowledge of elementary particles and of the fundamental forces through which they interact at low and intermediate energies. They now have an acceptable theory unifying the electro-magnetic and weak nuclear forces, along with much less adequate but still promising grand unified field theories which attempt to incorporate the strong nuclear interaction as well. Further in the fine of this same development, there are already several detailed suggestions for the final stage, superunification, that is, the unification of all four fundamental forces, including gravity. Is it not important for us to note that in a world of such detailed specialization as contemporary physics there exists this drive towards convergence?

In the life sciences, too, something similar has happened. Molecular biologists have probed the structure of living material, its functions and its processes of replication. They have discovered that the same underlying constituents serve in the make-up of all living organisms on earth and constitute both the genes and the proteins which these genes code. This is another impressive manifestation of the unity of nature.

By encouraging openness between the Church and the scientific communities, we are not envisioning a disciplinary unity between theology and science like that which exists within a given scientific field or within theology proper. As dialogue and common searching continue, there will be grow towards mutual understanding and a gradual uncovering of common concerns which will provide the basis for further research and discussion. Exactly what form that will take must be left to the future. What is important, as we have already stressed, is that the dialogue should continue and grow in depth and scope. In the process we must overcome every regressive tendency to a unilateral reductionism, to fear, and to self-imposed isolation. What is critically important is that each discipline should continue to enrich, nourish and challenge the other to be more fully what it can be and to contribute to our vision of who we are and who we are becoming.

We might ask whether or not we are ready for this crucial endeavour. Is the community of world religions, including the Church, ready to enter into a more thorough-going dialogue with the scientific community, a dialogue in which the integrity of both religion and science is supported and the advance of each is fostered? Is the scientific community now prepared to open itself to Christianity, and indeed to all the great world religions, working with us all to build a culture that is more humane and in that way more divine? Do we dare to risk the honesty and the courage that this task demands? We must ask ourselves whether both science and religion will contribute to the integration of human culture or to its fragmentation. It is a single choice and it confronts us all.

For a simple neutrality is no longer acceptable. If they are to grow and mature, peoples cannot continue to live in separate compartments, pursuing totally divergent interests from which they evaluate and judge their world. A divided community fosters a fragmented vision of the world; a community of interchange encourages its members to expand their partial perspectives and form a new unified vision.

Yet the unity that we seek, as we have already stressed, is not identity. The Church does not propose that science should become religion or religion science. On the contrary, unity always presupposes the diversity and the integrity of its elements. Each of these members should become not less itself but more itself in a dynamic interchange, for a unity in which one of the elements is reduced to the other is destructive, false in its promises of harmony, and ruinous of the integrity of its components. We are asked to become one. We are not asked to become each other.

To be more specific, both religion and science must preserve their autonomy and their distinctiveness. Religion is not founded on science nor is science an extension of religion. Each should possess its own principles, its pattern of procedures, its diversities of interpretation and its own conclusions. Christianity possesses the source of its justification within itself and does not expect science to constitute its primary apologetic. Science must bear witness to its own worth. While each can and should support the other as distinct dimensions of a common human culture, neither ought to assume that it forms a necessary premise for the other. The unprecedented opportunity we have today is for a common interactive relationship in which each discipline retains its integrity and yet is radically open to the discoveries and insights of the other.

But why is critical openness and mutual interchange a value for both of us? Unity involves the drive of the human mind towards understanding and the desire of the human spirit for love. When human beings seek to understand the multiplicities that surround them, when they seek to make sense of experience, they do so by bringing many factors into a common vision. Understanding is achieved when many data are unified by a common structure. The one illuminates the many: it makes sense of the whole. Simple multiplicity is chaos; an insight, a single model, can give that chaos structure and draw it into intelligibility. We move towards unity as we move towards meaning in our lives. Unity is also the consequence of love. If love is genuine, it moves not

towards the assimilation of the other but towards union with the other. Human community begins in desire when that union has not been achieved, and it is completed in joy when those who have been apart are now united.

In the Church's earliest documents, the realization of community, in the radical sense of that word, was seen as the promise and goal of the Gospel: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete" (1Jo. 1, 3-4). Later the Church reached out to the sciences and to the arts, founding great universities and building monuments of surpassing beauty so that all things might be recapitulated in Christ (Cfr. Eph. 1, 10).

What, then, does the Church encourage in this relational unity between science and religion? First and foremost that they should come to understand one another. For too long a time they have been at arm's length. Theology has been defined as an effort of faith to achieve understanding, as *fides quaerens intellectum*. As such, it must be in vital interchange today with science just as it always has been with philosophy and other forms of learning. Theology will have to call on the findings of science to one degree or another as it pursues its primary concern for the human person, the reaches of freedom, the possibilities of Christian community, the nature of belief and the intelligibility of nature and history. The vitality and significance of theology for humanity will in a profound way be reflected in its ability to incorporate these findings.

Now this is a point of delicate importance, and it has to be carefully qualified. Theology is not to incorporate indifferently each new philosophical or scientific theory. As these findings become part of the intellectual culture of the time, however, theologians must understand them and test their value in bringing out from Christian belief some of the possibilities which have not yet been realized. The hylomorphism of Aristotelian natural philosophy, for example, was adopted by the medieval theologians to help them explore the nature of the sacraments and the hypostatic union. This did not mean that the Church adjudicated the truth or falsity of the Aristotelian insight, since that is not her concern. It did mean that this was one of the rich insights offered by Greek culture, that it needed to be understood and taken seriously and tested for its value in illuminating various areas of theology. Theologians might well ask, with respect to contemporary science, philosophy and the other areas of human knowing, if they have accomplished this extraordinarily difficult process as well as did these medieval masters.

If the cosmologies of the ancient Near Eastern world could be purified and assimilated into the first chapters of Genesis, might not contemporary cosmology have something to offer to our reflections upon creation? Does an evolutionary perspective bring any light to bear upon theological anthropology, the meaning of the human person as the *imago Dei*, the problem of Christology – and even upon the development of doctrine itself? What, if any, are the eschatological implications of contemporary cosmology, especially in light of the vast future of our universe? Can theological

method fruitfully appropriate insights from scientific methodology and the philosophy of science?

Questions of this kind can be suggested in abundance. Pursuing them further would require the sort of intense dialogue with contemporary science that has, on the whole, been lacking among those engaged in theological research and teaching. It would entail that some theologians, at least, should be sufficiently wellversed in the sciences to make authentic and creative use of the resources that the best-established theories may offer them. Such an expertise would prevent them from making uncritical and overhasty use for apologetic purposes of such recent theories as that of the “Big Bang” in cosmology. Yet it would equally keep them from discounting altogether the potential relevance of such theories to the deepening of understanding in traditional areas of theological inquiry.

In this process of mutual learning, those members of the Church who are themselves either active scientists or, in some special cases, both scientists and theologians could serve as a key resource. They can also provide a much-needed ministry to others struggling to integrate the worlds of science and religion in their own intellectual and spiritual lives, as well as to those who face difficult moral decisions in matters of technological research and application. Such bridging ministries must be nurtured and encouraged. The Church long ago recognized the importance of such links by establishing the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, in which some of the world’s leading scientists meet together regularly to discuss their researches and to convey to the larger community where the directions of discovery are tending. But much more is needed.

The matter is urgent. Contemporary developments in science challenge theology far more deeply than did the introduction of Aristotle into Western Europe in the thirteenth century. Yet these developments also offer to theology a potentially important resource. Just as Aristotelian philosophy, through the ministry of such great scholars as St Thomas Aquinas, ultimately came to shape some of the most profound expressions of theological doctrine, so can we not hope that the sciences of today, along with all forms of human knowing, may invigorate and inform those parts of the theological enterprise that bear on the relation of nature, humanity and God?

Can science also benefit from this interchange? It would seem that it should. For science develops best when its concepts and conclusions are integrated into the broader human culture and its concerns for ultimate meaning and value. Scientists cannot, therefore, hold themselves entirely aloof from the sorts of issues dealt with by philosophers and theologians. By devoting to these issues something of the energy and care they give to their research in science, they can help others realize more fully the human potentialities of their discoveries. They can also come to appreciate for themselves that these discoveries cannot be a genuine substitute for knowledge of the truly ultimate. Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish.

For the truth of the matter is that the Church and the scientific community will inevitably interact; their options do not include isolation. Christians will inevitably assimilate the prevailing ideas about the world, and today these are deeply shaped by science. The only question is whether they will do this critically or unreflectively, with depth and nuance or with a shallowness that debases the Gospel and leaves us ashamed before history. Scientists, like all human beings, will make decisions upon what ultimately gives meaning and value to their lives and to their work. This they will do well or poorly, with the reflective depth that theological wisdom can help them attain, or with an unconsidered absolutizing of their results beyond their reasonable and proper limits.

Both the Church and the scientific community are faced with such inescapable alternatives. We shall make our choices much better of we live in a collaborative interaction in which we are called continually to be more. Only a dynamic relationship between theology and science can reveal those limits which support the integrity of either discipline, so that theology does not profess a pseudo-science and science does not become an unconscious theology. Our knowledge of each other can lead us to be more authentically ourselves. No one can read the history of the past century and not realize that crisis is upon us both. The uses of science have on more than one occasion proved massively destructive, and the reflections on religion have too often been sterile. We need each other to be what we must be, what we are called to be.

And so on this occasion of the Newton Tercentennial, the Church speaking through my ministry calls upon herself and the scientific community to intensify their constructive relations of interchange through unity. You are called to learn from one another, to renew the context in which science is done and to nourish the inculturation which vital theology demands. Each of you has everything to gain from such an interaction, and the human community which we both serve has a right to demand it from us.

Upon all who participated in the Study Week sponsored by the Holy See and upon all who will read and study the papers herein published I invoke wisdom and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ and cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 1 June, 1988.

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