



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO PONTIFICAL URBANIAN UNIVERSITY  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE PRESENTATION  
OF HIS ENCYCLICAL LETTER  
*FIDES ET RATIO***

*Wednesday, 11 November 1998*

*Your Eminences,*

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,*

*Distinguished Rectors of the Pontifical Universities and Athenaea of Rome,*

*Dear Students,*

1. It is a great joy for me to preside over this solemn academic convocation at the end of which I will bless the renovated Aula Magna of this pontifical university. It is here that those who will go to various parts of the world to proclaim, like new apostles, the Gospel of Jesus Christ are spiritually prepared and theologically formed. First of all, I cordially greet Cardinal Jozef Tomko, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and Grand Chancellor of the Pontifical Urbanian University, and I thank him for the kind words that he addressed to me at the beginning of our meeting on behalf of all those present. I also express my sincere gratitude to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, for the learned paper he presented a short while ago. I greet the rectors and professors of the pontifical universities and athenaea of Rome. And I affectionately greet all of you, dear teachers, students and staff of the Urbanian University, as well as those who wished to participate in this significant moment of theological reflection and ecclesial communion.

2. Cardinal Ratzinger has given us a masterful interpretation of a specific aspect of the Encyclical *Fides et ratio*. As a continuation of his thoughts I would now like to call your attention to what constitutes, so to say, the nucleus of the Encyclical, that relation between faith and reason which should be the focus of our reflection, especially in a period such as ours, marked by epoch-making changes in society and culture. The progressive transition towards forms of thought that are collectively termed “postmodernity” also calls for the Church to pay due attention to this process, making her voice heard so that nobody is deprived of that special contribution that flows from the Gospel (cf. *Fides et ratio*, n. 91).

Such a concern is justified, moreover, if we consider the sensitive role that philosophy plays in the formation of conscience, in the vitalization of cultures and, as a result, in the inspiration of laws that regulate social and civil life. In this task, while maintaining its autonomous epistemological status, philosophy cannot fail to benefit from contact with faith, which shows it the ways to reach even higher peaks.

3. Everyone knows of the importance that philosophy has gradually acquired over the centuries. Some systems survive to this day because of the speculative weight that allowed them to promote sure progress in human history. On the other hand, the role that philosophy plays cannot be relegated to a limited circle of persons. As I wrote: "All men and women are in some sense philosophers and have their own philosophical conceptions with which they direct their lives. In one way or other, they shape a comprehensive vision and an answer to the question of life's meaning; and in the light of this they interpret their own life's course and regulate their behaviour" (*Fides et ratio*, n. 30). The act of thinking distinguishes man within the created world. It is by thinking that he can respond in the best way possible to the task entrusted to him by the Creator of cultivating and caring for the Garden of Eden, where "the tree of knowledge of good and evil" is to be found (cf. Gn 2:15, 17; cf. *Fides et ratio*, n. 22). Therefore, with his thought, everyone can have an experience, so to speak, of "self-transcendence": in fact, he goes beyond himself and the limits that restrict him in order to approach the infinite. Those who proclaim the Gospel need philosophical preparation

4. However, the more he opens himself to the infinite, the more man discovers his own limits. A crucial experience, because, as he delves into new areas, he discovers that he is unable to go further. To this is added the experience of sin: human existence is marked by it, so that even reason feels its burden. Almost as a comment on the text of Genesis, a sentence in the Epistle to Diognetus, written at the dawn of Christian literature, offers us a profound insight into this condition. The unknown author writes: "In this place the tree of knowledge and the tree of life was planted: It is not the tree of knowledge, but disobedience that kills" (XII, 1). Here, then, is the real reason for the weakness of thought and for its inability to rise above itself. It is disobedience, a sign of the desire for independence, that undermines human behaviour, risking to block man's ascent to God, even in the area of philosophical reflection. When knowledge proudly withdraws into itself, it runs the risk of not always expressing prospects for life; if, on the contrary, it is accompanied by faith, then it is assisted in seeing the human good. The Apostle Paul warns: "'Knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor 8:1). Faith, which is made strong by love and is expressed in it, suggests to knowledge a criterion of truth that sees the essence of man and his real needs.

5. In an academic context such as today's, I believe that it is important to stress a further aspect which I mentioned in *Fides et ratio*. In the Encyclical I insisted not just on the necessity but also on the urgency of resuming that dialogue between philosophy and theology that, when well conducted, has proven highly beneficial to both. The invitation I made to "pay special attention to the philosophical preparation of those who will proclaim the Gospel to the men and women of today" (*Fides et ratio*, n. 105) is an echo of the same invitation once made with firm conviction by the Council Fathers (cf. *Optatam totius*, n. 15). While the study of philosophy opens the minds of young students to understanding the needs of modern man and his way of thinking and dealing with problems (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 57), the deep study of theology will make it possible to offer Christ, "the Way, and the Truth and, the Life" (Jn 14:6), as the answer to these demands, by directing their sights to the full meaning of life. At a time when knowledge seems fragmented, it is important for theology to discover forms that make it possible to identify the fundamental unity linking the various paths of research, by showing their ultimate goal in the truth revealed by God in Jesus Christ. In this perspective, a philosophy open to mystery and its

revelation can support theology itself in explaining how understanding the contents of faith promotes the dignity of man and his reason.

6. Recovering what was the patrimony of Christian thought, I wrote that the relationship between theology and philosophy “is best construed as a circle” (*Fides et ratio*, n. 73), as was also mentioned a short while ago by Cardinal Ratzinger. In this way both theology and philosophy will help each other not to fall into the temptation of reducing to a system the perennial newness found in the mystery of Revelation brought by Jesus Christ. It will always retain its power of radical newness, which no thought will ever be able to fully explain or exhaust. Truth can be accepted always and only as a fully gratuitous gift that is offered by God to be received in freedom. The richness of this truth forms part of the human fabric and calls for expression in the many forms that constitute human language. The fragments of truth that each person carries within himself must seek fulfilment in that one, definitive truth of which Christ is the perfect form. The truth about man is given to him in the Holy Spirit without measure (cf. Jn 3:34) in order to inspire thought that is no longer indebted to reason alone but also to the heart. Proof of this profound and fruitful thought is that “science of the saints” which led me a year ago to proclaim St Thérèse of Lisieux a “doctor of the Church”, in the footsteps of many saints, both men and women, who have left a significant mark on the history of Christian theological and philosophical thought. It is time for the experience and thought of the saints to be more carefully and systematically developed for a deeper understanding of Christian truths.

7. Theologians and philosophers, according to the requirements of their respective disciplines, are called to look to the one God who is revealed in creation and in salvation history as the perennial source of their work. The truth that comes “from above”, as history shows, does not compromise the autonomy of rational knowledge, but spurs it on to further discoveries that lead to authentic human progress, by encouraging a thought that can reach the human heart, thus producing fruits of life. I wish to entrust these prospects and these hopes to the intercession of the One who is invoked as the “Seat of Wisdom” and, as I call upon her constant protection for you and for the “intellectual forge” that your university is called to be, I impart my affectionate Apostolic Blessing to you all. Thank you!

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