Implications of *Fides et Ratio* for Seminaries

David R. Foster, Ph.D.

Encyclicals by tradition are addressed by the pope to his brother bishops. *Fides et Ratio* carries this traditional salutation, but an attentive reading suggests that it speaks directly to scholars. This is evident in the tone and content of the letter. In the introduction, when the pope explains why and to whom he is writing, he mentions first his brother bishops, and then immediately mentions “theologians and philosophers whose duty it is to explore the different aspects of the truth” and finally “all those who are searching.” In the valedictory John Paul addresses a special word to four groups in this order: “particularly to theologians,” then to “those responsible for priestly formation,” then to “philosophers,” and finally to “scientists.”

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*Fides et Ratio* goes to some length to engage the good will of its readers and win them by its explanations. There is even poetry in its images. Consider the opening lines, “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth,” or consider what seem the words of a philosopher poet, “human beings are astonished to discover themselves as part of the world.” (4)

*Fides et Ratio* is daring in relation to other encyclicals. It shows a willingness to make bold statements unencumbered by customary qualifications. I believe it is because the pope is so much in his element in *Fides et Ratio* that he is willing and able to make a more provocative statement. For example, the frank expressions of why faith needs reason (5 & 53) or the statement, “The truth comes initially to the human being as a question.” (26)

If *Fides et Ratio* is written with scholars in mind, then similar internal evidence suggests that ecclesiastical faculties are first in mind and, among these, seminary faculties are first of all. If *Fides et Ratio* is written with seminaries uppermost in mind, then we who labor in these schools for apostles ought to study it carefully. This article intends to be part of that effort, and to do so, reviews the encyclical in three ways: 1) a brief review of five concerns, 2) a slightly fuller review of four themes, and 3) a longer review of implications for seminaries using the schema of faculty, rector, and seminarians.

**Concerns**

The five concerns and four themes are a negative and positive statement of the same ideas, but both help us to understand the intention of the encyclical. What were the concerns of the pope?

1. That faith is in danger of losing reason, which is its necessary partner. (53)

2. That philosophy has been marginalized in seminary formation. (61 & 69)

3. That theologians have accepted contemporary philosophy uncritically. (55)

4. That contemporary philosophy has given up the search for wisdom, truth, and being. (81)
5. That contemporary philosophy is being accepted into the culture and having a debilitating effect, making it unwilling to ask questions of ultimate importance.

Themes

The first theme is the communion of faith and reason and the service they render one another. Fides et Ratio develops a deeper understanding of how faith and reason need each other, complete one another, and face dangers when separated.

As the title suggests, the relationship of faith and reason is at the heart of the encyclical. Fides et Ratio is not about the compatibility of science and religion, as some people supposed. The compatibility of science and religion is part of a well-articulated teaching of the church and is assumed in Fides et Ratio. Nor is Fides et Ratio intent on making the case that faith and reason do not exclude one another. Rather Fides et Ratio intends a more profound point, that faith and reason need each other, or better still, that the human person needs both just as a bird needs two wings in order to fly.

Implications for Seminaries

The implications for seminaries might conveniently be divided into implications for faculty, rectors, and seminarists.

Faculty

1. Tour de Force. The most obvious implication for faculty is that Fides et Ratio is an authoritative source document for the church's understanding of important theological and philosophical issues of our time, namely, those themes listed above. Fides et Ratio is an intellectual tour de force. It is hard to imagine the many

Faith without reason is in danger of falling into superstition. Reason without faith is unable to reach its primary goal, which is the truth about the meaning of life.

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ways our civilization will have changed in one hundred
years, but in 2105 A.D., I believe, Fides et Ratio will be
the most quoted among Pope John Paul's remarkable
collection of encyclicals.

Since the document is written with scholars in
mind, the encyclical will work well as a text for dis-
cussion. It is instructive to contrast this letter with Ex
Corde Ecclesiae in this regard. Ex Corde is addressed to
administrators of Catholic schools, and although it is
having a major impact on Catholic colleges, it is not
well suited as a text for faculty discussion. Fides et Ratio
in contrast is addressed to the faculty, and since it ad-
dresses the great intellectual issues of our day it is an ex-
cellent text for faculty discussion. The impact of Fides et
Ratio on Catholic colleges is yet to come.

2. Trove of Ideas. For faculty, Fides et Ratio repre-
sents a trove of provocative leads to be explored that be-
gin with the central themes but go well beyond them.
There are any number of passages that will stimulate
further study. One example is the pope's description of
the strength and vulnerability of knowledge had by be-
lief. Knowledge by belief, as is faith, is our way of
knowing the most important things, such as the truth
about persons. Knowledge by belief is also vulnerable,
and without reason it is susceptible to superstition and
gullibility.

This suggests an important tension. On the
one hand, the knowledge acquired through be-
lief can seem an imperfect form of knowledge,
to be perfected gradually through personal ac-
cumulation of evidence; on the other hand,
belief is often humanly richer than mere evi-
dence, because it involves an interpersonal rela-
tionship and brings into play not only a
person's capacity to know but also the deeper
capacity to entrust oneself to others, to enter
into a relationship with them which is inti-
mate and enduring. (32)

Another example has to do with using Scripture as
a source of philosophical insight. Contemporary philos-
ophers, including Christian philosophers, have avoided
the Scriptures as a source of insight. Fides et Ratio in-
vites philosophers to consider the “exceptional philo-
sophical density” of Scriptures, not for principles as is
proper for theology, but simply as a source of ideas to
be considered. By doing this, Fides et Ratio does phi-
losophy a considerable favor; Scripture offers many in-

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sights into man, the world, and the world's relationship to God that philosophy can then consider and attempt to verify by reason. (80)

For a final example, consider the much-debated question of whether there is a Christian philosophy. *Fides et Ratio* teaches that the church does not have an official philosophy, so to legitimately speak of a Christian philosophy is not to imply that faith involves one school of philosophy. *Fides et Ratio* says that the "term seeks rather to indicate a Christian way of philosophizing...conceived in dynamic union with faith." (76) The encyclical goes on to describe both a subjective and objective aspect to Christian philosophy.

3. A Challenge and a Measure. *Fides et Ratio* challenges scholars to respect the primacy of inquiry (4), to make use of the legitimate insights of modern philosophy (48), and remain open to the questioning of their positions (79). *Fides et Ratio* is also a yardstick to measure our positions in relation to church teaching.

In one way, most Catholic philosophers and theologians will feel both vindicated and challenged. In another way, most will feel either vindicated or vexed.

On the first level, scholars will feel simultaneously challenged and vindicated. Challenged in the ways just mentioned (to respect the primacy of inquiry, etc.) and vindicated because in its balanced presentation, something positive is said about the old and the new, the progressive and the conservative. For example, those who want to emphasize that Thomism is not the only acceptable approach to philosophy will appreciate the pope's comments that the church has no official philosophy and that every philosophy must remain open to criticism. Those who believe that Thomas is undervalued in many seminaries will find strong support in the repeated endorsement of Thomas as the model for the integration of faith and reason.

On the second and deeper level, scholars will feel either vindicated or confronted. The encyclical is balanced but it does not fail to give direction on important questions. Thus:

- Those who have advocated the substitution of social science for philosophy should feel confronted.
- Those who defended the human person's ability to know the truth should feel vindicated.
- Those who have uncritically accepted postmodern philosophy should feel confronted.
- Those who propose a pluralism based on the inability to know the true from the false should feel confronted.
- Those who propose a pluralism based on the richness of being should feel vindicated.

Rectors

For rectors, *Fides et Ratio* gives the ratio for the new Program for Priestly Formation (PPF). It is a guide for the philosophy program, and it is an aid to faculty development.

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1. Recto Ratio. *Fides et Ratio* gives rectors an extended explanation of the relationship between philosophy and theology and why the church has long insisted on an adequate preparation in philosophy. *Fides et Ratio* gives the ratio for insisting that college seminaries meet stricter standards and that pre-theology programs must meet the same standards.

2. Program Guide. In Chapter 7, *Fides et Ratio* gives three criteria for a philosophy to be "consonant with the word of God." (81) These minimal requirements are particularly helpful. They clarify what it means for a philosophy to be suitable for use in theology, but they are modest enough to leave open a broad range of philosophical approaches.

The first criterion is that philosophy must have a sapiential dimension; that is, a philosophy must seek ultimate answers and be able to fulfill its role of ordering other sciences to an ultimate end. This last phrase, about philosophy ordering other sciences to their proper end, may sound presumptuous. I think it is a timely warning that if our rapidly advancing technologies (e.g., nuclear fission and fusion, genetic manipulation, cloning) are not guided by wisdom and at times restrained, then they could be our destroyer. Wisdom about when to use genetic manipulation is not gained by learning how to do it.

The second requirement for a philosophy harmonious with theology is that it must verify the human capacity to know the truth. Any philosophy that denies this human capacity cannot fulfill the task theology asks
of it. The claim is not that we have perfect knowledge, but that we can know the truth, even if only in part and imperfectly. The claim is implicit in the Scriptures and the central theme of *Fides et Ratio*.

The third criterion is that philosophy have a genuinely metaphysical range, in other words, it must be open to the full spectrum of being, including the possibility of divine being.

*Fides et Ratio* is a guide to other aspects of the program, such as the purpose of the program, philosophy's relation to theology, the importance of history, the providential encounter with Greek philosophy, and the need to respect the wisdom found in every culture.

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3. Faculty Development. *Fides et Ratio* gives the rector a guide to recruiting faculty. The three criteria that the encyclical lays down for an adequate philosophy also can be applied to philosophers, i.e., they must have a sapiential dimension in their philosophy, recognize the human capacity to know the truth, and have a philosophy open to the full range of being. A seminary professor need not agree with everything in the encyclical, but if he cannot appreciate the basic teaching of the encyclical then he is ill suited to form men for service in the church.

**Seminarians**

1. Model of Discourse. *Fides et Ratio* is a landmark encyclical that seminarians should read to gain the sense of the church on the reasonableness of faith, on the faithfulness of reason, and on what the church expects of a philosophy used by theology. Students will find in *Fides et Ratio* a model of intellectual discourse.

Consider the 14 paragraphs of introduction; they are an example of how *Fides et Ratio* seeks to engage scholars. The opening sentence both captures the imagination and foreshadows the entire letter. “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know Himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”

Then *Fides et Ratio* turns to the metaphor of a journey and describes how people in every age have sought the truth about the same fundamental questions, which are expressed in the sacred writings of all major religions. The encyclical points out that philosophy is the common property of all mankind and that everyone engages in it to the extent that they formulate their answers to the fundamental questions of life. The introduction gets us to nod our head and say “Amen.”

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.... The admonition *Know yourself* was carved on the temple portal at Delphi, as testimony to a basic truth to be adopted as a minimal norm by those who seek to set themselves apart from the rest of creation as “human beings,” that is, as those who “know themselves.”

Moreover, a cursory glance at ancient history shows clearly how in different parts of the world, with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?* (1)

Next, *Fides et Ratio* explains the experience of the church as both companion of all on the journey and bearer of a unique mission to share the gospel with all. It shows the church's desire for dialogue, respect for the dignity of the individual person, and appreciation for the wisdom of every culture.

The Church is no stranger to this journey of discovery, nor could she ever be. It is her duty to serve humanity in different ways, but one
way in particular imposes a responsibility of a quite special kind: the *diakonia of the truth*. (1) This mission on the one hand makes the believing community a partner in humanity's shared struggle to arrive at truth; (2) and on the other hand it obliges the believing community to proclaim the certitudes arrived at, albeit with a sense that every truth attained is but a step towards that fullness of truth which will appear with the final Revelation of God: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully" (*1 Cor* 13:12). (2)

*Fides et Ratio* has already recalled the words inscribed over the temple door in Delphi, "know yourself." Next, it recalls Aristotle's teaching that "human persons by nature desire to know" and that philosophy begins with wonder. Then, in its own philosophical observation, *Fides et Ratio* says, "human beings are astonished to discover themselves as part of the world." One might rightly begin to question this observation, and by these thoughts we are led to the insight that if we do not feel "astonished" we ought to.

Driven by the desire to discover the ultimate truth of existence, human beings seek to acquire those universal elements of knowledge which enable them to understand themselves better and to advance in their own self-realization. These fundamental elements of knowledge spring from the wonder awakened in them by the contemplation of creation: human beings are astonished to discover themselves as part of the world, in a relationship with others like them, all sharing a common destiny. (4)

The encyclical recognizes philosophy as a basic tool in man's journey of discovery. It points out that we can discern a "core of philosophical insight within the history of thought" and that this can be used as a basis for making judgments about philosophical systems. *Fides et Ratio* warns us against identifying one single stream with the whole of philosophy. In such cases, it says that we are dealing with philosophical pride. It asks that all philosophical systems "recognize the primacy of philosophical enquiry, from which it stems and which it ought loyally to serve."

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2. Practical Effects. *Fides et Ratio* puts an exclamation point on the pope’s consistent call for a beefier philosophical formation. Seminarians should read *Fides et Ratio*, but they will be affected by it whether they read it or not. Practically, it affirms the call for an increase in the minimum number of required courses, clearer guidance about the content of the courses, and a minimum of two years of study.

The insistence on two years of philosophy affects primarily the pre-theology programs, and the length of time that a candidate with a college degree but without the prerequisites prepares for ordination. Seminaries in North America have been reticent to require this of candidates. I believe the extra time is perhaps the most important of the “new” requirements. There is a limit to the rate of absorption; ideas need time to simmer. Biting the bullet on the two-year requirement will pay off with better theology students and priests better equipped for their increasingly sophisticated parishioners.

**Conclusion**

This article suggests that for seminary faculty the implications of *Fides et Ratio* are an intellectual *tour de force* regarding the issues of our time, a treasure trove of ideas, and a challenge to and measure of ideas. For rectors the implications are a clear rationale for the academic changes proposed in the PPF, a guide for philosophy programs, and an aid to faculty development. For seminarians, *Fides et Ratio* is a model of intellectual discourse, and an authoritative source of church teaching on faith and reason.

In one Father Brown story, G. K. Chesterton’s clerical detective unmasks a false priest. His first clue was that the imposter disparaged reason, which is bad theology.2 If *Fides et Ratio* has its way, bad reasoning will continue to be evidence of an imposter.

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**Endnotes**

1. *Fides et Ratio* is a complex document of about 37,000 words in 107 sections. It continues the work of the pope’s earlier encyclicals, *Veritatis Splendor* and *Pauperes Dabo Vobis*. In a more remote way, it carries forward the themes of Vatican I, Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris*, Pius XII’s *Humani Generis*, and Vatican II.

2. The statement is made at the end of “The Blue Cross,” found in the collection *The Innocence of Father Brown*, by G. K. Chesterton, 1910.