

John Paul II summarized the content and goals of his encyclical *Fides et ratio* in an address to a group of US bishops during their *ad limina*, 24 October 1998. What follows is an excerpt.

“In response to the spiritual crisis of our times, I am convinced that there is a radical need for a healing of the mind as well as of the heart. The violent history of this century is due in no small part to the closure of reason to the existence of ultimate and objective truth. The result has been a pervasive skepticism and relativism, which have not led to a more “mature” humanity but to much despair and irrationality. In the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, published only last week, I wished to defend the capacity of human reason to know the truth. This confidence in reason is an integral part of the Catholic intellectual tradition, but it needs reaffirming today in the face of a widespread and doctrinaire doubt about our ability to answer the fundamental questions: Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going to? Why is there evil? What is there after this life? (cf. *Fides et Ratio*, 3 and 5). Many people have been led to believe that the only truths are those which can be demonstrated by experience or scientific experimentation. The result is a tendency to reduce the domain of rational inquiry to technological, instrumental, utilitarian, functional and sociological dimensions of things. A relativistic and pragmatic vision of truth has emerged. An undifferentiated plurality, based on the assumption that all positions are equally valid, replaces a legitimate pluralism of positions in dialogue (cf. *ibid.*, 5). One of the most striking indications of the contemporary lack of confidence in truth is the tendency found among some to rest content with partial and provisional truths, “no longer seeking to ask the meaning and ultimate foundation of human, personal and social existence” (*ibid.*). By being satisfied with experimental and incomplete knowledge, reason fails to do justice to the mystery of the human person, made for the truth and deeply desirous of knowing the truth.

The consequences for the faith of this widespread attitude are serious. If reason cannot attain ultimate truths, faith loses its reasonable and intelligible character and is reduced to the realm of the non-definable, the sentimental and the irrational. The outcome is fideism. Detached from its relationship to human reason, faith loses its public and universal validity and is limited to the subjective and private sphere. In the end, theological faith is destroyed. On the basis of these concerns, I considered it important to write the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, addressed to you, the Bishops of the Church, the principal witnesses to divine and catholic truth (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25). My wish is to encourage you, as Bishops, always to keep open the horizon of your ministry, beyond the immediate tasks of your daily pastoral toil, to that deep and universal thirst for the truth which is found in every human heart.

The dialogue of the Church with contemporary culture is part of your “*diakonia* of the truth” (*Fides et Ratio*, 2). You must do all you can to raise the level of philosophical and theological reflection, not only in seminaries and Catholic institutions (cf. *ibid.*, 62), but also among Catholic intellectuals and all those who seek a deeper understanding of reality. As we approach the new millennium, the Church’s defense of the human person requires a firm and open defense of the capacity of human reason to reach definitive truths concerning God, concerning man himself, concerning freedom and concerning ethical behavior. Only through reasoned reflection, open to the fundamental questions of existence and free from reductive pre-suppositions, can society discover sure points of reference on which to build a secure foundation for the lives of individuals and communities. Faith and reason in cooperation manifest the grandeur of the human being, “who can find fulfillment only in choosing to enter the truth, to make a home under the shade of Wisdom and dwell there” (*ibid.*, 107). The Church’s long intellectual tradition is born of her confidence in the goodness of creation and the ability of reason to grasp metaphysical and moral truths. Collaboration between faith and reason, and the continued involvement of Christian thinkers in philosophy, are essential elements of the cultural and intellectual renewal that you must foster in your country.”