

Listening to a Pope in a Secular Age: Interpreting “Fides et Ratio”

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I have often characterized philosophy when asked what it is by way of the recurring questions it asks. If pushed I distinguish philosophy as an enquiry that intends upon going all the way in its questioning, and thus all the way in its thinking. This, of course, raises a question about the questioning: all the way to where? Such questioning of questioning, or self-reflexive questioning, is a good example of the philosophical spirit at work. It is a very human spirit and in some respects is more indicative of being childlike than wise or learned. This question of the nature of the questioning has been the source of a major difference between religiously inclined philosophers and secular philosophers who are influenced by a tradition that has been very suspect of such inclinations. There are thinkers such as Bertrand Russell who at one time dismissed the validity of certain “big” questions—questions that have been the concern of religion and metaphysics such as “how did it all begin,” “where is it all headed,” and “what is the meaning of it all.”¹ This has had the effect on those who followed Russell’s lead of limiting philosophy to worldly or material concerns, and to direct thinking away from any serious consideration of religious or spiritual matters.

In human thinking, however, there remains the persistent and perplexing capacity to raise the question of the nature of totality, of the whole of the universe. This has naturally led to a further question of the cause or origins of this totality which can be traced back to the very beginning of philosophy and human thinking itself.² For some, such as Russell, these troublesome questions were considered invalid as sources of real knowledge, at least as he had thought many Christian thinkers had pursued them. Thus any answer, or effort to answer, was dismissed as a kind of folly as far as real knowledge was concerned. Any answer was considered meaningless because the question itself was a venture into meaningless or, at best, emotive discourse.

My own questioning and the “conversation” in which the questions arose took on a renewed appreciation for the question of faith and philosophy’s difficult relationship to faith. Our discussion of Augustine and Kierkegaard, to the extent they had pondered faith and reason’s relationship, had helped us to give this question a special focus. It was, however, Pope John Paul II (hereafter JP) with his recent encyclical “Fides et Ratio” who entered our little Agora, provoking intense interest in this question of faith and reason’s relationship.³ In my discussions with students and colleagues, I had used JP’s brief reference to Socrates and what JP had referred to as “the decisive orientation” Socrates gave to philosophy at its very beginning. Of course, the reactions of students and colleagues to the words of this religious leader, who at times in the encyclical writes as a philosopher, were mixed. Yet one young skeptic remarked to my surprise how he thought these few words of the Pope were the best thing he had read all year. I asked, “how so?” He said,

"because the Pope speaks of answers; everybody else just raises questions!" Others have suggested with perhaps more philosophical sophistication that this precisely is the problem in "Fides et Ratio": JP attempts to answer questions that cannot be answered, or at least cannot be answered with the certainty JP claims. Furthermore, some suggest the encyclical is riddled with an unfortunate dogmatism.⁴

Despite the encyclical's apparent dogmatism, I would like to revisit the conversation that has taken place over the past year among my students and colleagues. I believe it may shed some light on the question of "faith and reason" and the merits of JP's recent contribution as both a philosopher and religious leader. I suspect that because JP is a religious leader and pastor he is easily misunderstood and even dismissed as a philosopher, and perhaps because he is a philosopher in so much of his thinking he may even at times be misunderstood as a religious leader. In other words, part of the challenge in interpreting JP's encyclical is in sorting out when he thinks and questions as a philosopher and when he thinks and answers as a religious leader. He is doing both in the encyclical and it can be an irritating source of confusion and misunderstanding, especially for the reader whose own thinking has been greatly influenced by our modern secular prejudice.

I shall begin by examining JP's brief references to Socrates since it is here that we enter into the philosophical heart of the encyclical and encounter the very human reality of faith as well. It is here with Socrates, under sentence of death, that faith and reason are conjoined at the very beginning of philosophy, and we can see clearly the origins of what historically has been both a disconcerting confusion and a powerful intermingling in human thought and action. It is a relationship of mutual interdependence, in my view, such that if reason is carelessly torn from the soil of faith it withers, while the soil of faith erodes and is impoverished.

A Socratic Motif for Reason and Faith

JP clearly views the questions that reason and philosophy ask as involving a desire for definitive answers. As many of my students attest, this is a very natural desire. JP claims it is our natural desire for truth, and he understands human life itself as our "journey to meet truth." As a philosopher JP recognizes this desire as a never-ending search, a questioning toward what he refers to as "an ultimate mystery." Through philosophy, JP argues, we desire and hope to pursue and attain definitive answers.

Yet JP concedes that no one culture or system of thought can ever become the standard for this fullness of truth that we desire. It would seem that philosophically there is only the questioning and thinking that is never finally answered or completed. Yet as human beings we seek an absolute as well, a final explanation which refers to nothing beyond itself and puts an end to all questioning. JP clearly is arguing for a philosophical thinking and questioning that is prepared to go all the

way, that tends toward an ultimate mystery that can somehow and somewhat paradoxically provide an answer that is absolute and final. Clearly, he understands philosophy as not only naturally open to religion but of positive assistance in being religious by removing intellectual obstacles to what he regards as the definitive answers of religious faith. JP argues, as I interpret him, that this tendency in human thought is natural for the human person and is present in a humanizing manner in the very origins of philosophy itself. It is an understanding of faith as deeply human and integral to reason.

The faith that is spoken of here, however, is not the faith that works as a secondary support to reason while reason retains its dominance over the field of thought. Rather, it is a primordial faith that is transformative of both reason and experience. It is religious faith to which reason may be a subsequent support in assisting in faith's self-understanding and articulation. At this point in the encyclical faith is not given a particular Christian credal expression. Instead, JP recalls Socrates in his effort to understand the universal human aspect of such faith.

JP suggests that in a sense we, like Socrates, are all under sentence of death. While common sense has it that there is no greater evil than death, JP writes: "the first absolutely certain truth of our life, beyond the fact that we exist, is the inevitability of our death." Thus, he says, we earnestly desire to know the truth of our own destiny. He writes:

It is not insignificant that the death of Socrates gave philosophy one of its decisive orientations, no less decisive now than it was two thousand years ago. It is not by chance, then, that faced with the fact of death philosophers have again and again posed this question of the meaning of life and immortality.... No one can avoid this questioning, neither the philosopher nor the ordinary person. The answer we give will determine whether or not we think it possible to attain universal and absolute truth; and this is a decisive moment of the search.⁵

Yet because we regard death as a great evil, powerful people and institutions can use our fear of death to control us. It is helpful to recall the words of Socrates in the *Apology* which serve as a direct challenge to this common sense assumption:

For fear of death is indeed the pretense of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being a pretense of knowing the unknown; and no one knows whether death, which men in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good. Is not this ignorance of a disgraceful sort, the ignorance which is the conceit that man knows what he does not know? And in this respect only, I believe myself to differ from men in general, and

may perhaps claim to be wiser than they are:—that whereas I know but little of the world below, I do not suppose that I know: But I do know that injustice and disobedience to a better, whether God or man, is evil and dishonorable, and I will never fear or avoid a possible good rather than a certain evil.⁶

Socrates asserts that he knows with certainty that there is something worse than death—a certain evil in relation to which death may lead to a possible, but uncertain, good. Here we have together Socrates's commitment to a "not-knowing-wanting-to-know" method in the pursuit of truth and his claim to certainty regarding the meaning of his own existence and mission as a philosopher. Here, in my view, we have both critical reason and faith conjoined in the original philosophic spirit.

JP's preoccupation with death may be seen as continuing the Christian interpretation of Socrates that too easily and quickly becomes focused on otherworldly affairs. It is the legacy of Christianized Platonism that divides the world into being and becoming, spirit and matter, soul and body. The latter is always seen as a poor reminder of the former, or as a means to the former reality which is our true and desired destiny. Christianity, at least in its dominant expressions, is taken to have embraced this dualism, directing our attention and much of our spiritual energies toward a life after death. This dualism is understood to have had a profound effect upon our culture and behavior, the dangers of which have become apparent to many modern critics in the face of the looming environmental crisis. It has created an attitude and practice in which the value of this life is drained off and transferred onto the next life. Our spatio-temporal existence is rendered unintelligible and sterile, a disenchanted playing field within which we could do as we please once acquiring the power to do so. This philosophical issue is really of momentous significance for it may provide an important interpretive key to understanding the philosophical dimensions of the technological and instrumental direction of human history. It may also explain why we have been entranced and rendered almost completely impotent in altering our momentum and changing our patterns of behavior. This is the disturbing postmodern critique of our culture given special impetus in Heidegger's monumental project.⁷

I would suggest that the issue of death—one's own death, that is—is of fundamental importance, as JP stresses, and that there is a certain and decisive orientation given to the philosophical conversation in Socrates's confrontation with his own death. But I do not believe this certainty of Socrates has anything to do with immortality. This is only an uncertain possibility, and is treated by Socrates rhetorically and ultimately as a matter of ignorance.

Nevertheless, Socrates, in my view, confronts a fear that is common to human beings and felt most forcefully in the face of death. In our ideological

projects and dogmatic commitments we hope for protection against that which we fear or even against fear itself. I would suggest that it is death we fear—an ultimate death—when imagined as our total annihilation. This fear, Socrates almost ironically suggests, is not fear of the unknown, but on the contrary is based upon a false presumption to know the unknown. The risk of evil here is in turning away from what is actually known because of the fearful person's presumption to know what remains unknown. Socrates thus comes down on the side of faith in the unknown, in the sense of hope and trust toward it becoming a possible good. Yet this is grounded in a certainty, and can even be taken as a type of absolute in JP's sense. For Socrates, it is a very personal absolute, a certain faith in the meaning and mission of his own life.

This, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, is a kind of "chosenness," such that if he were to turn against it he would be choosing a certain evil over a possible good that may come with death. This is the certain answer in the faith of Socrates. I believe it is also what JP is trying to get at in his reflection on how Socrates's self-understanding involved in his experience of "chosenness" is similar to that found in the Christian martyrs, in as much as JP's discussion of their faith centers first and foremost on the truth of an encounter and not on immortality.⁸ In this certainty of faith we, depending upon our own religious or secular prejudice, will find philosophy in its origins either "mired" or "rooted" in a kind of religious faith.

The Question of Faith's Relationship to Reason

JP distinguishes religious truth from both scientific truth based upon empirical investigation and philosophic truth based upon the speculations of natural reason. By contrast, he maintains, religious truth is found within religious traditions that offer answers to the ultimate questions of human life. He further distinguishes between philosophical knowledge and knowledge concerning the mysteries of faith. The former is largely the work of human effort whereas the latter is a "gift of faith." These ways of knowing, according to JP, occur within the unity of the one truth.

This distinction between religious knowledge and truth, and philosophical knowledge and truth is central for any constructive interpretation of the encyclical. The Pope's philosophical understanding of truth as the mind's conformity to reality can be taken as essentially referring to truth as answer expressed propositionally. This is seen by many as leading to a rigid dogmatism in Roman Catholicism which, particularly in this Pope's reign, has resulted in a closing off of conversation in several important areas. Without doubt, the Pope as religious leader wants to affirm the cognitive content of religious truth as expressed propositionally within his own tradition. He also wishes to affirm its universal significance and this, for any philosopher, is bound to be problematic. But it is not at all clear that he is offering in this encyclical all these interpretive propositions as certain or final. There are

some fundamental assumptions in the encyclical that are seemingly presented as absolute and universal dogmas which are identified by JP as operating, especially for Christian thinkers, at the border of faith and reason. For example: faith, simply stated, is our relationship with the mystery of God, whether it is consciously understood as such or not. Religious faith recognizes the important element of commitment and mission of a people of faith, which might help us distinguish it from individual "spirituality." Religious knowledge and truth have to do with our conscious and cognitive appropriation of this faith relationship.⁹ But JP would insist that these "dogmas," if taken as such, open us up to reality rather than close us off from it. I suggest that it may be worth hearing JP out on these matters because, as I hope to demonstrate, there may be new and important clearings opening up for us even within a religion with a strong dogmatic tradition such as Roman Catholicism.

It has long been recognized in the philosophy of religion that there are primary data of faith. There is the simple "fact" of being "chosen," of being addressed at the core of our existence in a profoundly integrating, though often disturbing, way. In such instances to doubt such an experience amounts to doubting our very existence. It simply is beyond question. It was Socrates's experience of the certainty in the meaning and mission of his own life as a philosopher.

Buber, Jaspers, and Marcel, all religiously inclined philosophers, have shown (convincingly, in my view) that we are not closed off in a phenomenal world where we have to infer the reality of our encounter with the Other. Rather, human beings are primordially open to such encounter.¹⁰ The experiences of friendship and love, the most powerful of human experiences, are only accounted for and understood adequately when acts of "meeting with" and "being addressed by" are granted the same certainty as our "thinking about" and "reflecting upon." From time immemorial, religion has viewed the world as created in order that it may mean something. For Buber, for instance, faith has to do with the ultimate dialogical structure of existence; the world as a whole is comprehended as "address" to which we as creature "respond" with the whole of our life.¹¹

There are truths that in their primacy are not grasped by us; we are grasped by them. The "Word of God" in the Christian tradition is understood as striking us down, breaking in upon us. We do not seize it; we are seized by it. This is the encounter with Mystery, not conceived as a problem to be solved, but rather as an encounter of a Presence that draws near with such power that we are overwhelmed in our comprehension.¹² Socrates's certainty, like Augustine's, was founded in a renewed knowledge and appreciation of his own existence because of such an encounter. Religious certainty that emerges from such an encounter is intimately related to the certainty of our own existence as creature. We are permeated by the unspeakable answer of Mystery to the question of our own existence. Even in Socrates, where we find the origins of the philosophic spirit referred to by Russell, there is the certainty of the meaning and mission of his own life, such that if he

were to turn against it he would be committing a certain evil.¹³ This conviction, despite his accusers's suspicions, was not simply his own willful fabrication; it was the certainty of faith.

It would be a serious misunderstanding to interpret this certainty as simply a fearlessness that enables one to face death without doubt. This may be a consequence, but it is not its origin. This always remains a subjective "certainty" with the possibility one is being led into objective error as, for example, in the case of youth recruited out of difficult circumstances to kill and fight willingly to the death. They do so for a cause because of the promise by some religious authority of a glorious reward in the hereafter. For the philosopher this always remains problematic. It is dogmatism at its worst and which it has been philosophy's mission in the spirit of Socrates to challenge and expose.

In my view, the point of Socrates's decisive orientation for philosophy referred to by JP is significantly different and has nothing to do with dogmatism of this sort. There is the certainty in having been chosen, of having been addressed, claimed, raised up by some "higher power" so that in his own existence he is certain of this dialogue as integral to his own identity. This is the nature of his religious certainty in faith that lies at the heart of any authentic religious tradition. In the Christian tradition we have acknowledged and named this certainty: Christ as Lord and Savior, the Christ in our heart, to which JP repeatedly witnesses in his encyclical as religious leader of this particular tradition.

Here, I contend, is the source of legitimate dogma in the sense of a certainty uttered in religious faith which Lonergan refers to as a "knowledge borne of religious love," a knowing of, and a being known by, Mystery by which we are grasped in the very essence of our existence.¹⁴ Rahner has written that such knowledge in faith takes place in the power of the mystery of God, while at the same time this Spirit is the concrete reality known in faith. The object of faith is not something merely passive, indifferently set over against us as subject, but is at the same time the principle by which it is grasped as object.¹⁵ What Rahner is attempting to express here as a theologian seems very close to a way of thinking reached in a type of contemporary philosophy where, as in Heidegger, thinking opens up toward the unthinkable. According to Gadamer, we find in Heidegger "a way of thinking that brushes against the unthinkable.... Heidegger calls it 'remembrance' and the dubious echo of 'reverence' may well have been intended, in as much as the religious experience touches the unprethinkability of Being more than metaphysical thinking."¹⁶ Here again, with a thinker acknowledged to have given contemporary philosophy a "decisive orientation" perhaps as vital as that given by Socrates to the ancients, we may have a formative confluence of faith and reason. As JP sees it in somewhat classical terms, this could be interpreted as further evidence of "the great dialogue between theology and philosophy" where "faith asks that its object be understood with the aid of reason, and at the summit of its searching reason needs the data of faith."¹⁷

The Problem and Art of Interpreting

The crucial question for both philosopher and theologian is how we are to continue interpreting this “unthinkable,” and thus “unspeakable,” reality of which we persist in “thinking” and “speaking.” How are we to do so both for those situated within our tradition and for those outside the tradition but with whom we are engaged in important ways? I would suggest that the language and concepts used in both instances will be different with the former being more particular and concrete, and the latter being more formal and general. The former expressions as well are likely to be marked, as in liturgy, by a more pronounced psychological and logical certainty, whereas the latter are to be much more tentative and uncertain in an epistemological sense. Yet paradoxically it is here on the margins where language is used to foster communication and understanding with other traditions that propositions still having logical links to the experience of chosenness at the center of the tradition, are most likely to be forged with an openness of universal significance.

Yet, as Rahner has pointed out, in the certainty of the revelation there is no final guarantee of a correct interpretation in theology.¹⁸ This is reserved, in faith, for the Church as a whole, and we can imagine this involving, as always, a strong element of analogical reasoning in the face of unutterable Mystery. Nonetheless, it has a concrete and visible aspect and should not be entirely etherealized as some would have it.

There is always the work of a living tradition in pursuit of truth. As Segundo views it, dogmatic theology, the discipline charged with the responsibility of giving intellectual and noetic witness to the truth of this Mystery at the center of this living tradition, is conceived as not infallible by virtue of being irreformable. Instead, dogmatic expression and formulation is to be worked at and reformed precisely because it is part of the infallible communication of God to humankind.¹⁹ This is our certainty in faith, our “chosenness,” fundamental to a living tradition called to transcendence and universality.

It is worth examining how JP considers an article of Catholic dogma that would seem upon a superficial reading to confront and resist the pluralistic reality in the world today. In his book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, JP treats the theological dogma that “there is no salvation through any other Name” as a revealed truth interpreted as “there is salvation only and exclusively in Christ.”²⁰ I would first call attention to the fact that there are two claims at work, one explicitly uttered from the center of the tradition, and one more implicit. The implicit claim is more formal and operates at the margins with much more certainty than the other. It is the claim that “there is revealed truth.” This is a certainty. It may be expressed: “We are addressed by God, and God’s word is true.” It is not taken as a hypothesis within the tradition. It is dogma expressing a primary datum of faith. The second claim we may grant is less formal and less certain, at least at

the margins, for it involves more interpretation—a particular Christian interpretation of the meaning of this “Word of God.” It is because of the formal certainty and primacy of “God’s Word is True” that so much work goes into interpretation within the changing context of history and human existence.

In interpreting this dogma, JP writes that it cannot be understood by looking exclusively at the visible aspects of the Church. It cannot be interpreted ecclesiocentrically, but must be read

... in a Christocentric way ... rooted in the Mystery of the Trinity, involving sacrifice on the altar of all creation. All creation [is] understood to be working out its eternal destiny in God. There are other forms of relationship beside formal membership. “Outside the church there is no salvation” is extremely open and can easily be misunderstood. True worshippers worship God in spirit and truth.²¹

As a religious leader JP’s language and interpretation is the expression of care and responsibility for the members of the visible Church, but there remains a clear openness toward others in his expression and interpretation. He sees the Church’s saving mission ultimately as a mystery, and asserts that it can only be understood theologically in relation to a much greater mystery: that of the Trinity. According to JP, we are drawn into this mystery and its invisible dimension, a mystery much greater than sociological statistics regarding formal membership.

As a philosopher of religion I would interpret this passage from JP very generally—that there is no salvation outside a relationship with the mystery of God and that ultimately the saving work of God as a universal claim remains a mystery for us. It is something that at a very high level of generality remains indefinite and only becomes definite in a particular and personal way within the definite historical circumstances of a particular religious tradition. Thus, at this level of generality we are committed, in this example, to very little that is concrete, definite, and at the same time certain in an absolute and universal sense. Or, we could say more positively, we are committed to something that ever remains indefinite, a lure, a guide, something that gives us or guarantees us propositionally very little certainty in the absolute universalizing sense that JP seems to be seeking at places in his encyclical.

It needs to be added, however, that these general certitudes of formal intelligence can serve as guides toward personal certitude once given sensible content and existentially appropriated. Also, as Lonergan has argued, the generalities of our philosophical and theological intelligence must be given sensible and concrete reality in our everyday lives or they vanish for the human subject.²² There is an intimate interplay between the general and the particular in our thinking and living. There is thus both freedom and responsibility for each generation and

each individual to work creatively at finding one's way with intelligence and commitment, as well as some basis for mutual understanding along this way.

But so too are there limits and guideposts for the journey enjoining us to avoid this or that direction. These are often known best in hindsight. Therefore, to move in a direction that is knowingly opposed to revelation and the meaning of Christ for his Church and the world is an error. JP knows this in faith. Still, on the margins of the tradition where pluralism is acutely experienced, there is perhaps, as K. Rahner has insisted, only one universal and absolute prohibition clearly offered by the entire tradition. We are not to close ourselves off from the mystery of God.²³ This is an injunction, in my view, against sectarian and egocentric monologue and for dialogical openness.

In our interpretation of the Encyclical we have argued that faith involves an element of "chosenness." In the experience of "chosenness" lies a certainty in faith that is religious. In its primordial origins the philosophic spirit is a confluence of both reason and faith, of both questions and answers in the sense of both uncertainty and certainty. The encyclical, as I interpret it, is a powerful reminder of how reason is intimately involved with faith, and more to the point how the philosophic spirit can open up, at least in an implicit sense, toward religious faith.

Raymond Panikkar, the eminent scholar of world religions, affirms the important nature of the experience of "chosenness" as experienced in all the Abrahamic religions:

The experience of being chosen ... is a powerful experience. It is so powerful that without it in a very fundamental way we would not rise to the consciousness of being what we are. Our individual personality is the fruit of a series of relationships of which the most important are these in which we are on the receiving end. Without nurture the child dies. We discover ourselves when somebody calls us, when we experience that we are a Thou for somebody. Our I emerges in relationship with a thou. We feel we are somebody when we have responsibility for someone; we learn to love when we are loved."²⁴

Houston Smith further suggests that philosophic reason is in trouble when it turns against religious faith in this sense:

Philosophy is obviously in crisis and I think we can see the reason why. It is coming to recognize that autonomous reason—reason without influences that both power and vector it—is helpless. By itself, it can deliver nothing apodictic, working (as it necessarily must), with variables, variables are all it can come up with. The Enlightenment's "natural light of

reason" turns out to have been a myth. Reason is not itself a light. It is more like a transformer that does useful things, but on condition that it is hitched to a generator.²⁵

Aquinas: A Case Study

In his analysis of the encyclical, Anthony Kenny examines Aquinas's relationship as a philosopher with his own religious faith and finds it ambiguous.²⁶ As a Christian philosopher Aquinas accepted in faith many of the conclusions for which he developed supporting philosophical arguments. Kenny opposes Russell's famous charge that the work of finding arguments for conclusions accepted in advance is not philosophy but a "special pleading." Kenny points out that Russell, like many philosophers, both secular and religious, has spent a great deal of time and effort doing just that. In Russell's case, he can be thought of as working in the service of science instead of the Church. Nevertheless, Kenny concludes that Aquinas must be seen as a great philosopher "in spite of, not because of, the ecclesiastical constraints under which he worked."²⁷

This clearly is a more friendly interpretation of Aquinas's status as a philosopher than that offered by Russell, yet it can easily be misunderstood if Aquinas's religious faith in the Church and its structures is dismissed by implication. Aquinas's faith and work as a philosopher need to be considered in light of Smith's insight on the nature of reason's relationship to faith. Kenny's point is crucial in that Aquinas's relationship to the rules of the Church as interpreted by some of his peers and superiors was not straightforward. It was, without doubt, complex and troubled at times. Yet Kenny's point, I believe, emphasizes only part of the story of Aquinas: the manner in which he was able to exercise philosophical freedom. However, Aquinas was not only a philosopher; he was principally a theologian. He was a Christian monk living in obedience to a particular order within the larger Church. It simply would be mistaken to suppose that Aquinas accomplished all he did in spite of that order and structure, and was in no way empowered by the definition and meaning it gave to his life and work. A. N. Whitehead has strongly alluded to this fact in a more generalized way: "It is customary to under-value theology in a secular history of philosophical thought. This is a mistake, since for a period of about thirteen hundred years the ablest thinkers were mostly theologians."²⁸

Still, we avoid one of the most difficult problem of our times as we dwell on this notion of "chosenness" at the heart of any living tradition in either philosophy or religion. It is only when we move to the margins and honestly confront the plurality of traditions that the difficulty of our problem and that of the Encyclical comes into focus.

Our specific problem is less with the certainty of chosenness than with the accompanying claim of universality where everyone is understood to be called to become Christian. JP argues in the encyclical, as religious leader and theologian,

that faith presupposes that our language can express divine and transcendent reality in a universal way. JP further asserts that while many paths lead to truth it is because Christian truth has universal salvific value that any path can be taken so long as it leads to the revelation of Christ. Nonetheless, he adds a subtle but vitally important qualification: that when language expresses divine and transcendent reality meaningfully it does so analogically.²⁹ Unfortunately, this qualification is left unclarified and forgotten in the encyclical so that what Rahner has referred to as the "uncanny back and forth between affirmation and negation" in our religious and theological language is overlooked.³⁰ This limitation in the encyclical can be a source of confusion and prompt the charge of dogmatism to which we referred earlier.

Panikkar asks the critical question for our times: "How is this to be made concrete and real in the face of pluralism and the counter claim that we are not the only custodians of true religion?" He suggests that "resolution of this tension will involve a profound change in Christian self-understanding."³¹ Panikkar stresses that the classical understanding of universality in our own times must be taken as an uncertain interpretation. Without this concession we are at risk of a "Christian imperialism." This tension, in Panikkar's view, has been present from the beginning of Christianity and has too often been interpreted in destructive ways throughout history.

Houston Smith, however, cautions that there are risks here for both faith and reason.³² There is danger of both hubris and overreaction. There are definite differences in religions and their respective revelations. Smith suggests that this would "counter any possibility of their equality in revealing the One True God." He then adds, however, that nothing turns upon such equality, and it is more important that we believe existentially that the "Word is True," risking the charge of exclusiveness rather than compromise theological conviction. Smith writes: "Togetherness is nice but it has no rights over religious truth."³³ Postmodern thinking, in his view, has become so fearful of the marginalization of some particular perspective or "revelation" that religious truth itself is denied.

Fr. Marc Smith gives a clear definition to the seriousness of the dilemma in which interpretations of the meaning and mission associated with an experience of "chosenness" can exacerbate conflict and violence. If the supreme values of different traditions are interpreted as incompatible, rendering the collaboration needed and sought practically impossible, then those who have convinced themselves that they do know the truth in an absolute and universal way may very well see themselves as justified in imposing by force their dogma and culture upon the other. Historically, this combination of absolute truth, universality, and power has been a dangerous formula.³⁴

This Pope, according to Janet Somerville, is keenly aware of this danger. She observes that in preparing the Church for the new millennium, JP has taken unprecedented measures to acknowledge publicly in the common prayer life of

Catholics "the evil woven into the missions and convictions of the Church."³⁵ He has done this not only by recognizing the sins of weakness but the "sins of hard-hearted strength, the sins that made it easy to set aside respect for others and compassion for human suffering." Somerville interprets this as indicative of a hope for a fundamental change in the Church's self-understanding—with respect not to the fact of "chosenness" but to the interpretation of "mission" that follows from the experience of "chosenness." She writes: "I think it is aimed at a particular hope for our mission: namely, that we won't give up on mission (as so many of us have already done) but that we will never again officially confuse mission with domination."³⁶

The question of universality, and the challenge of its interpretation in the face of pluralism, becomes essentially a question, if not a crisis, of mission. As Segundo proposes, the truth of the Christian revelation "is not 'possessed' ... until we succeed in transforming it into a real humanizing difference within history."³⁷ Faith as "chosenness" and faith as "mission" have always been expressed and understood as one reality in the life of the Church and not as a cause and effect relationship. Mission, according to Haight (commenting upon an earlier encyclical), should not be conceived as an external effect of the grace of "chosenness."³⁸ Still there remains a sense in which the authenticity of mission is the true test of the "chosenness" in religious faith. A fundamental turning point in Christian self-understanding has been reached, according to Panikkar, because of our encounter with other cultures and religions.

In this encyclical JP offers the Christian tradition as the most complete way of realizing our best as human beings with all other ways, at least by implication, taken as approximations of this mysterious completeness. As well, he suggests that Christian philosophy can greatly assist the Church in its mission. In contrast, Panikkar would have the Church understand itself as a symbol of an invisible mystery transcendentally present in any culture or religion. As the protestant evangelical theologian Bruce Epperly has proposed, "wherever truth and healing are present Christ is present."³⁹

Panikkar explores the origins of this new way of being religious which he terms "christianness" by way of contrast with the traditional self-understanding of Christianity:

The primitive Christian church has a sort of transcendental relation to cultures and religions. She inspired and transformed them by a kind of Incarnation dynamic. But at that point she did not claim to be a religion. In point of fact, the church crystallized as a full-fledged religion by adapting and adopting the religiousness of the peoples who "converted" to Christianity. It then took a definite shape and became a religion.

Christians since at least the last millennium have wanted to have it both ways: to be chosen and yet universal. This creates a tension that needs fundamental rethinking....

If the Christian church represents one single chosen people, it is understandable that she should keep her way of worship, her doctrine and life-style—even her culture—as closely linked as possible with the concreteness of the chosen people and the likeness of the Founder. Anybody wanting to join the flock is welcome, provided the candidate abjures all the “errors” or imperfections of the former way of life. The Christian church is the concrete way provided by God to save people. All are called to join her, accepting her particular ways as sanctioned by God.... [I]f the Christian church claims to be ready to accept every culture, language and way of life because her message is allegedly not tied to any particular human phylum, and aspires to be at home in Africa, Asia and the whole world—then such a (universal) chosenness demands her renunciation of any claim to be a particular religion.⁴⁰

(Along with this controversial proposal, Panikkar acknowledges an intentional universality postulated for the sake of meaningful communication, where we presuppose in our speech act that “what is the case for us” must also “be such for others” to some degree. But how much so for others, and in what way, is precisely the question at hand, and JP’s encyclical has raised this issue in an important and provocative manner. It is precisely this question of the universality of our mission, and how it is best understood amidst the reality of our world’s religious and cultural pluralism.)

We might ask at this point, in the spirit of Socrates, if there is any deeper faith that differing particular faith expressions can consciously share. There would seem, in practice, to be a common and rich soil of an unarticulated faith that we do draw strength and hope from, and according to differing contexts we give it differing expressions in our thinking and uttering. As Cardinal Martini points out in his discussion of this very question with Umberto Eco, in the realm of practice it is the things and events themselves and not the names uttered that are important. But Martini adds we would be naive to dismiss the importance of names: “They are not arbitrary but the fruit of intelligence and understanding and, if and when shared, lead to the recognition of common values. There is still a long road in this matter of ‘names’ calling for courage and intelligence in examining the meaning of simple things.”⁴¹ It is an issue, Martini suggests, on which hangs the fate of the world. For without faith and its sense of mission there is no reason to change. Without the hope in something better that comes from the mission of faith why, he asks, change our present ways?

Conclusion

JP’s encyclical could very well be treated as fuel for the restorationist trends within conservative Catholicism where “chosenness” is propositionally clarified and boundaries are even more clearly defined. As a religious leader this is an understandable desire, and there are times when consolidation and even protection in any human organization is warranted. But this will, in my view, only increase the challenge and crisis in Christian mission which, as we have tried to show, is integral to our sense of chosenness. The Church, as JP and Panikkar both point out, is not only a sociological construct; it is also a mystical reality. Our visible and conscious commitment to what Rahner has called this “incomprehensible mystery revealed in Christ” means we must continue with courage and hope to find concrete ways of sharing in this mystery manifest in other traditions and cultures, and to do so without betrayal of our own chosenness. As Panikkar understands this challenge, we have both “a Christianity reforming its theoretical and dogmatic self-understanding and a practical christianness striving towards one.”⁴²

JP is right, in my view, to call for a renewal of reason’s relationship to faith, especially in the sense of philosophy’s relationship to religion and theology. Philosophy can assist by providing theories and concepts to aid in the dialogue among different traditions. This can only be good for both the Church and humanity, and perhaps help in providing a basis for what JP calls the planetary ethics of which the world is very much in need. As the history of this ancient relationship witnesses, and as we saw in our brief references to Aquinas above, this history is unlikely to unfold as we expect. It will surprise us, and many of us will naturally resist out of fear or indifference. Panikkar reflects on the “terrific crisis of identity” that occurred at the beginning of the early Christian Church: “The unpredictability of the Holy Spirit shattered preconceptions.... [T]he rules against association and the primordial sacrament of Judaism (circumcision) are overthrown and replaced with Baptism.”⁴³

This bursting of bonds and forging of new bonds, this questioning anew of old answers and answering anew of old questions is fundamental to the analogical structure of human thinking and acting in communion with ultimate mystery to which the encyclical only too briefly refers. This will be integral and constitutive of any new missionary vision—a mission without domination, a mission in service and friendship. Toward this future, JP as religious leader invites all people of good will to work, and people of faith to pray.

Notes

1. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (London: Unwin Books, 1967), 138–159.

2. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Beginning of Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 1998).
3. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter "Fides et Ratio" (Sept. 14, 1998).
4. Frank Cronin, "Fides et Ratio: A Response" (1999). See *The Tablet*, June 19, June 26, and July 3, 1999.
5. John Paul II, "Fides et Ratio," 26–27.
6. Plato, *Apology*, in *Philosophy: History and Problems*, ed. Samuel Enoch Stumpf (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 558.
7. See Gadamer, *Heidegger's Ways* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).
8. John Paul II, "Fides et Ratio," 32.
9. *Ibid.*, 7, 13, 33.
10. See Will Herberg, ed., *The Writings of Martin Buber* (New York: Meridian, 1970); Gabriel Marcel, *Mystery of Being* (Chicago: Gateway, 1968); Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existence* (New York: Noonday Press, 1956).
11. Herberg, *The Writings of Martin Buber*, 270.
12. See Karl Rahner, "The Theology of Mystery and Symbol" in *A Rahner Reader*, ed. Gerald McCool (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 108–120.
13. See Anthony Kenny, "The Pope as Philosopher," *The Tablet*, June 26, 1999.
14. See Bernard Lonergan in *The Lonergan Reader*, eds. Mark Morelli and Elizabeth Morelli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 477–479.
15. McCool, *A Rahner Reader*, 94–99.
16. Gadamer, *Heidegger's Ways*, 26–27.
17. John Paul II, "Fides et Ratio," 74.
18. McCool, *A Rahner Reader*, 97.

19. Eduardo Mendieta, Review of *The Liberation of Dogma: Faith, Revelation, and Dogmatic Teaching Authority* by Juan Luis Segundo, *Cross Currents* 43:3 (1993), 405–407.
20. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 136.
21. *Ibid.*, 137.
22. Lonergan, *The Lonergan Reader*, 425.
23. Karl Rahner, *Do You Believe in God?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1969), 10.
24. Raimundo Panikkar, "Chosenness and Universality: Can Christians Claim Both?" *Cross Currents* 38:3 (1988), 315.
25. Houston Smith, "Philosophy, Theology, and the Primordial Claim," *Cross Currents* 38:3 (1988), 280.
26. Kenny, "The Pope as Philosopher."
27. *Ibid.*
28. A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 129.
29. John Paul II, "Fides et Ratio," 84.
30. Karl Rahner, "Experiences of a Catholic Theologian," *Theological Studies* 61:1 (2000), 5.
31. Panikkar, "Chosenness and Universality," 310.
32. Smith, "Philosophy, Theology, and the Primordial Claim," 288.
33. *Ibid.*, 288.
34. Fr. Marc Smith, "Lonergan's Cosmopolis: Authentic Subjectivity and Human Coexistence" in *Violence and Human Coexistence: Proceedings of the Second World Congress of ASEVICO* (Montreal: Montmorency, 1994), 197–202.
35. Janet Somerville, "John Paul II: Mission Without Domination," *Catholic New Times* 24:2 (April 2, 2000).

36. Ibid.

37. Mendieta, Review of *The Liberation of Dogma*, 405.

38. Roger Haight, "The Liberation Theology of the Center," *Grail* 2:3 (1986), 23–32.

39. Bruce Epperly, "The Healing of Jesus for the 21st Century," *Process Perspectives*, Fall 1999, 14.

40. Pannikar, "Chosenness and Universality," 323.

41. Carlo Maria Martini, "Hope for the New Millennium: An Exchange Between Umberto Eco and Carlo Martini," *Cross Currents* 47:3, 379–387.

42. Pannikar, "Chosenness and Universality," 339.

43. Ibid., 311.