

Pontiff's encyclical links philosophy and theology

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In a long-awaited encyclical titled *Fides et Ratio* ("Faith and Reason"), Pope John Paul II warned of a growing separation between modern thought and the "ultimate truths" of religion, a division that he said is leading people to ethical confusion and even despair.

In response, the pope appealed for a renewed harmony between philosophy and theology. He urged intellectual leaders to rise above today's utilitarian vision of life and allow transcendent truths to guide them.

At the same time, he asked the church's theologians to recover the "metaphysical dimension of truth" in their own work, and help bring the certainties of faith back into the moral life of believers.

The 35,000-word document, released at the Vatican Oct. 15, was the product of years of reflection by the 78-year-old pontiff, on a theme dear to his heart. Addressed to the bishops of the world and written in a specialized vocabulary, its message was aimed primarily at experts in the fields of philosophy and theology.

But the encyclical also struck universal themes about the meaning of life, the ability to know the truth and the deep questions posed by evil and death. In a global culture that mistrusts absolute truths and relies too much on pragmatism and technology, it said, many men and women are left to "stumble through life" confused and anxious.

"At the end of this century, one of our greatest threats is the temptation to despair," the pope wrote.

The aim of the encyclical, he said, was to offer people fresh confidence in seeking the truth and alert them to errors which condition their attitudes and behavior.

In particular, the pope challenged a "post-modern" view that would judge all values as relative. Truth cannot be arrived at by consensus, and morality cannot be decided by majority vote, he said, yet such ideas are taking hold — a consequence of the notion that reason can do without faith.

The encyclical emphasized Christ's sal-

vation as the event that enlightens both theology and philosophy. It said Christian revelation is a "lodestar for all" who seek to know life's meaning, and defended the "universal value" of the church's philosophical heritage.

Divided into seven chapters and heavily footnoted, the encyclical begins with a simple thematic statement: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth." It said the church's interest in ultimate truths builds upon an age-old quest for meaning that can be seen in such diverse sources as Homeric poetry, the preachings of Buddha and the Old Testament.

This search for final answers has always been a hallmark of philosophy, which over the centuries has left a "spiritual heritage" to humanity: a core of insight into the human being's capacity to know God, truth and goodness, as well as certain fundamental moral norms shared by all, it said.

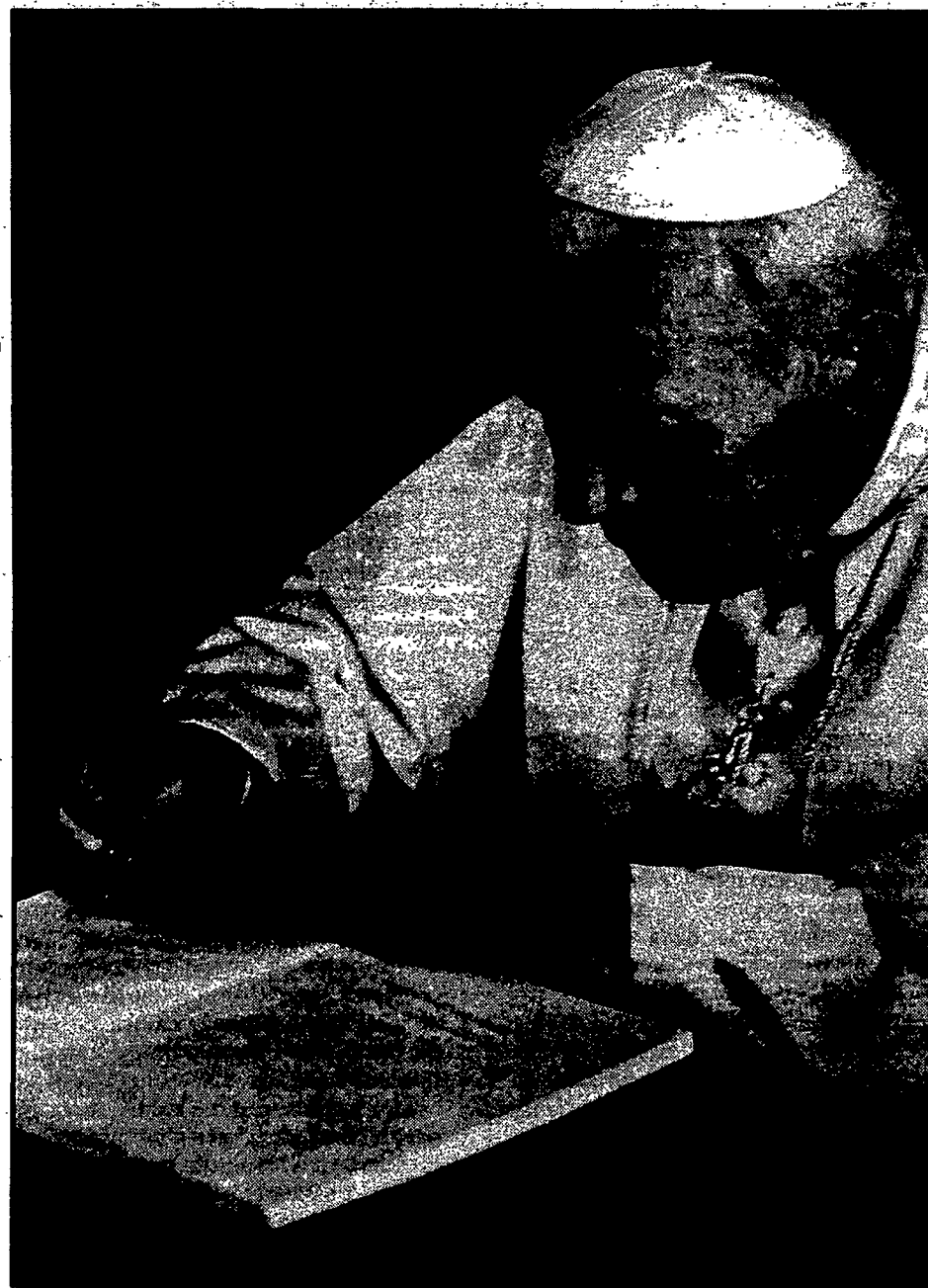
But the pope said the modern age, increasingly skeptical of any claim of absolute truth and increasingly absorbed by human experience and data, has driven a wedge between faith and reason. One result is a dangerous misunderstanding of freedom, he said.

"Different philosophical systems have lured people into believing that they are their own absolute master, able to decide their own destiny and future in complete autonomy, trusting only in themselves and their own powers. But this can never be the grandeur of the human being," he said.

"Truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery," he said.

The pope faulted modern philosophers for accentuating the limits on the human search for meaning. In our age, he said, reason has been overloaded with subjective knowledge and information about human experience, but has "lost its capacity to lift its gaze to the heights."

He outlined a catalogue of current philosophical errors, and said theologians have been susceptible to them, too. These included historicism, which gauges the validity of a philosophy according to its historical context; scientism, which relegates



Arturo Ma/CNS

Pope John Paul II signs his 13th encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* ("Faith and Reason") Oct. 15 at the Vatican. The 35,000-word document concerning modern thought and truth was aimed primarily at experts in philosophy and theology.

religious and theological knowledge to the realm of fantasy; pragmatism, which excludes judgments made on ethical principles; and nihilism, which denies all the foundations of objective truth.

He said these errors have profoundly influenced modern attitudes, especially in science and technology. Some experts in these fields feel they have a "quasi-divine power" over nature and human beings, he said.

The pope said technological progress demands, instead, a sharpened sense of ultimate values.

"If this technology is not ordered to something greater than a merely utilitarian end, then it could soon prove inhuman and even become a potential destroyer of the human race," he warned. Many people recognize this, and live in fear of what contemporary man produces, he said.

The encyclical contrasted the "radical doubt" of modern times with past centuries of philosophical development, in which church fathers such as Sts. Augus-

tine, Thomas Aquinas and Anselm played a major role. It said the various branches of modern theology still need philosophy.

Here, the pope noted a tendency for theologians to rely less on the church's "Eurocentric" philosophical heritage and more on the traditions of local populations. But he said they have a duty to "go beyond the particular and the concrete" and demonstrate the universality of the faith, as the early church fathers did.

The pope concluded his encyclical with three exhortations. He asked theologians to refocus on the transcendent dimension of truth, so they can enter into a critical dialogue with contemporary philosophical thought. He appealed to philosophers to always "strive for truth" and to help formulate an urgently needed "planetary ethics."

And he urged all people to look more deeply at the human being's search for meaning, and recognize that ultimately they will understand human freedom only within the "horizon of truth."

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**Congratulations to
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