

'Faith and Reason' presents an irony

Pope John Paul II has recently issued a 150-page encyclical on faith and reason, said to have been more than a dozen years in preparation. A philosopher by academic training, the pope makes an appeal for the restoration of the central place of reason in philosophy, theology, and other intellectual disciplines.

However, for anyone versed in traditional Catholic theology, and particularly in the teaching of the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), the encyclical's main theme is a familiar one. The pope reaffirms the teaching of Vatican I that faith and reason are not mutually opposed; they complement one another in the work of understanding the truths of divine revelation.

Like the pope, the council had warned against two extreme views of the relationship between faith and reason. The one, Rationalism, so exaggerates the role and capacity of reason in the understanding of divine revelation that it effectively denies the reality of faith itself. What cannot be understood and verified by reason alone is not worthy of belief.

But the council also condemned Rationalism's opposite number, Fideism, which so exaggerates the role and capacity of faith that it effectively denies any role for reason in the understanding of divine revelation. Faith, therefore, is reduced to "blind" faith or, on the human level, to a form of credulity.



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

"Faith and reason can never oppose one another," Vatican I's Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith declared. "They mutually aid each other, because right reason demonstrates the foundations of faith, and, illumined by faith's light, it cultivates the science of things divine; while faith liberates and preserves reason from errors, and furnishes it with manifold knowledge."

Father Theodore Hesburgh, CSC, the president emeritus of the University of Notre Dame, put it more simply. A cover story on Catholic higher education in the Feb. 9, 1962, issue of *Time* magazine began with the familiar quote from George Bernard Shaw: "A Catholic university is a contradiction in terms." In response, Father Hesburgh pointed out that there can be "no conflict between science and theology except where there is bad science or bad theology."

Significantly, Father Hesburgh conceded the possibility of bad theology as

well as bad science. Apparent or real conflicts cannot always be blamed on science. When science and theology are opposed, it may be that science is right and theology is wrong.

Since theology is employed not only by theologians but by the official teachers of the church, the principle applies to the pronouncements of the church's magisterium as well as to the writings of its theologians.

Thus, in the critical and highly complex area of medical ethics, for example, it is possible that some of the church's official teachings may insufficiently reflect the findings of modern medical science. It is not that these scientific findings are unavailable to the church's theologians. The problem is that, in the area of medical and bio-ethics especially, the official teachers sometimes rely upon only one school of theology and moral philosophy — a school that seems less conversant with, and sympathetic toward, modern medical science.

The easiest and least controversial example of all is the church's condemnation of Galileo for insisting that the earth revolves around the sun rather than vice versa. Soon after his accession to the Chair of Peter, John Paul II himself officially acknowledged the magisterium's error in the matter, albeit 3½ centuries late.

It should be noted that copies of the recent encyclical, "Faith and Reason," were (once again) distributed in advance

to Vatican favorites — those who could be relied upon to offer positive commentaries for the media on the very day of the document's release. Op-ed pieces in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, and excerpts of press interviews with selected philosophers and theologians, offer cases in point.

Those interpretations focused particularly on the encyclical's celebration of reason and its criticism of those who have allegedly abandoned its use even in the understanding of divine revelation and faith.

The irony is that this pontificate has discouraged the use of scientific reason by theologians and ethicists when their scholarly findings have raised questions about the validity of certain assumptions on the magisterium's part.

Might the encyclical, therefore, have been more accurately entitled, "Faith, Reason, and Authority," with the implicit understanding that the greatest of these is authority?

It is, at the very least, a mixed message to send to the church's scholarly community, namely, to embrace reason in the work of philosophy, theology, and other sciences, but also to avoid, at the risk of a "just penalty," any conclusions that may be at apparent or real variance with the magisterium's own view of the truth.

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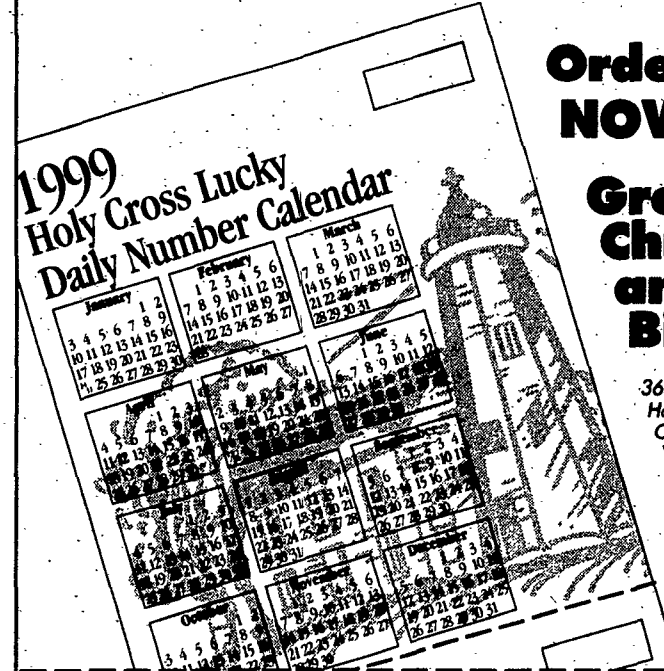
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