

## Faith and Reason

Since this course will take us on a voyage of “faith seeking understanding,”<sup>1</sup> let’s begin with a short prayer:

I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate thy sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe: that unless I believed, I should not understand.<sup>2</sup>

St. Anselm of Canterbury continued to develop the doctrine of his predecessor Augustine regarding the relationship between faith and reason: a man must have faith in order to understand (*credo ut intelligam*). Faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*) is the proper point of departure for any serious theological study. His Holiness John Paul II commented in *Fides et Ratio* on Anselm’s doctrine of faith and reason:

St. Anselm underscores the fact that the intellect must seek that which it loves: the more it loves, the more it desires to know. Whoever lives for the truth is reaching for a form of knowledge which is fired more and more with love for what it knows, while having to admit that it has not yet attained what it desires: "To see you was I made; and I have yet to do that for which I was made." (*Ad te videndum factus sum; et nondum feci propter quod factus sum.*)<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that the non-believer can’t understand the arguments for God’s existence. What it *does* mean is that the non-believer must be a lover and seeker of truth—open to believing in God but simply not capable of it yet—in order for these arguments to make any sense to him. If the non-believer doesn’t *want* to believe in God, i.e. if he doesn’t love and seek the truth, then no argument will convince him.

Aquinas summarized the faith-reason relationship in the following way:

- 1) God exceeds the capacity of reason, thus faith is necessary to supplement the truths of which reason is capable.

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<sup>1</sup> *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”) was the title that St. Anselm had originally chosen for the *Proslogion* before changing its name.

<sup>2</sup> ST. ANSELM, *Proslogion*, a cura di Giovanni Zuanazzi, Editrice La Scuola, Brescia 1993, Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, Number 42.

- 2) Reason is subordinated to faith, and faith makes use of reason in three ways:
- a) Reason demonstrates the preambles of faith, i.e. the truths about God which are accessible without the assistance of revelation (God's existence and his essential attributes of unity, goodness, intelligence, etc.).
  - b) Reason helps us to understand in some way the mysteries of revelation, by means of analogy and similitude.
  - c) Reason is helpful for apologetics, showing the rational validity of the truths of faith and the rational inconsistency of denying these truths.
- 3) Reason and faith can never contradict each other: "*Nulla tamen umquam inter fidem et rationem vera dissensio esse potest.*"<sup>4</sup> Although not all the truths of faith can be demonstrated by reason, most (*all* according to Peter Kreeft) of the arguments *against* faith can be debunked by reason alone. This is precisely because faith and reason have the same root. Truth cannot contradict truth.

Faith and reason cooperate with each other. Faith provides certain items of knowledge which lie beyond the scope of natural reason (though never contradictory to it), and reason gives logical arguments to support the tenets of faith. Both reason and faith are fundamental sources of truth, and one can't neglect the other without grave consequences. Reason without faith is rationalism; faith without reason, fideism.

The Five Ways and other rational proofs are designed to support and strengthen faith, not substitute it. However, they are very helpful for those who don't believe in God but would like to. Solid rational arguments can powerfully stimulate the hesitating would-be believer to ask for and embrace the gift of faith, which comes only from God.

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<sup>4</sup> CONCILIIUM OECUMENICUM VATICANUM I, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Dei Filius*, c.2.