

SCIENCE AND CATHOLIC FAITH



Episcopal Commission for Doctrine
Canadian Conference
of Catholic Bishops

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1. Are faith and science compatible? Can one be a scientist and a Catholic at the same time? These questions are worth considering today since this year marks the twentieth and twenty-fifth anniversaries, respectively, of the publication of two of Pope Saint John Paul II's important letters to Catholics: *Fides et Ratio* (*Faith and Reason*) and *Veritatis Splendor* (*The Splendor of Truth*). While each of these papal teachings has its own specific focus, both clearly affirm our human ability to attain to true religious and scientific knowledge through the use of our reason. The Pope explicitly said this about *Faith and Reason* in his speech to a group of U.S. bishops in 1998:

In the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* [*Faith and Reason*]... 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.¹

2. In *The Splendor of Truth*, the Pope fully endorses science but also states that scientific knowledge does not exclude other forms of knowing, such as those of philosophy and theology:

The development of science is a splendid testimony to man's tireless search and his capacity to understand. Yet science and technology do not free us from the obligation to ask religious questions, but spur us on to face the most difficult questions of the heart and conscience.²

3. The anniversary of these important papal letters is an opportunity for us as Bishops to address the relationship of Christian faith and science and to reassure the faithful, and especially young people, that their Church sees this relationship as one of complementarity and mutual stimulus. In saying this, we are affirming that while the religious and scientific domains are distinct, they are ultimately beneficial

1 Pope John Paul II, Address to Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of the United States of America, 24 October 1998.

2 Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (*The Splendor of Truth*), no. 1.

for each other. As Pope Saint John Paul II wrote in a letter to Fr. George Coyne, SJ, Director of the Vatican Observatory:

Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world in which both can flourish.³

4. It is true that such a complementary partnership between Christianity and science has not always been widely recognized by the general public. Still today we can hear comments in popular media about how “science doesn’t need religion.” Here in Canada we recently had an example of this very opinion when a government leader affirmed that “science” alone is sufficient to explain the origins of the universe without any reference to God. Such a statement is associated with a philosophy known as “scientism.”

5. In fact, the Pope identifies scientism as “the philosophical notion which refuses to admit the validity of forms of knowledge other than those of the positive sciences ... [and] which dismisses values as mere products of the emotions and rejects the notion of being, in order to clear the way for pure and simple facticity.”⁴

6. In reply to such a “scientist” claim about and for science, we have a basic explanation from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which says:

‘Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason. Since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth.’ Consequently, methodical research in all branches of knowledge, provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner and does not override moral laws, can never conflict with the faith, because the things of the world and the things of faith derive from the same God.⁵

3 Pope John Paul II, Letter to Reverend George Coyne, S.J., Director of the Vatican Observatory, 1 June 1988.

4 Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason), no. 88.

5 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 159 (citing the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* [The Son of God] from the First Vatican Council [1870], no. 4).

7. In addition to this answer to scientism from our Catechism, we can point to the fact that historically and still today, many great scientists are also people of faith. Contrary to what is popularly known, in recent years several scientists who are Christian believers have written about science from an informed theological perspective. This includes Catholics such as

- Fr. Michał Heller at the Vatican Observatory, who does research on quantum gravity;
- Peter Hodgson, a professor of nuclear physics at the University of Oxford (died in 2008);
- Kenneth Miller, a professor of biology at Brown University.

As Canadians, we can be proud of the great contributions to the field of botany made by many Canadian Catholic priests and religious who were also scientists.⁶ Particularly in the province of Quebec, these Catholics were leaders in understanding and classifying the plant life of Eastern Canada.

8. There are also non-Catholic Christian scientists writing theologically about science, such as Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project; Owen Gingerich of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics; and the Rev. John Polkinghorne, professor of particle physics at the University of Cambridge. We can also point out that, through the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, the Catholic Church has access to the latest scientific research and information from both Catholic and non-Catholic scientists. The renowned astrophysicist, Stephen Hawking, although a non-Catholic and atheist, was a member of the academy from 1988 until his recent death.

9. These observations about scientists who are also people of Christian faith corroborate the findings of contemporary historians of science, who claim that there is even a consensus among scientists today that the Catholic Church has made great contributions to science. Thomas E. Woods, for example, asserts that the mainstream view now is that “the Catholic Church has played a positive role in the development of science ... even if this new consensus has not yet managed to

6 These include Fr. Louis-Ovide Brunet (1826–1876); Fr. Léon Abel Provancher (1820–1892); Brother Marie-Victorin, F.S.C. (1885–1944); and Fr. Louis-Marie Lalonde (1896–1978).

trickle down to the general public.”⁷ The historian of science Ronald L. Numbers makes the observation that those in his profession have known for years that the relationship between the Catholic Church and science has not been an antagonistic one, “yet the message has rarely escaped the ivory tower.”⁸ Another science writer, Robert Kurland of the Catholic Writers’ Guild blog, reacts to the claim that today’s youth think there is “a disconnect between science and religion,” asserting that if they knew better what science is all about, they would recognize that there is really no ‘disconnect’ at all.⁹

10. We have pointed out that science and Christian faith are not opposed to each other. But we can go further than this and say that faith contributes something that human reason cannot achieve on its own. A belief in the compatibility of faith and reason allows us to attain what Saint John Paul II calls “a unified and organic vision of knowledge ... [whereas] the segmentation of knowledge, with its splintered approach to truth and consequent fragmentation of meaning, keeps people today from coming to an interior unity.”¹⁰ Scientism, on the other hand, denies that human beings can know anything beyond whatever falls under the limited purview of science, thereby depriving people of a broader vision of knowledge.

11. Yet as human beings, we are made for more than this. Again, to take up the words of Saint John Paul II in *Faith and Reason*,

it is necessary not to abandon the passion for ultimate truth, the eagerness to search for it or the audacity to forge new paths in the search. It is faith which stirs reason to move beyond all isolation and willingly to run risks so that it may attain whatever is beautiful, good and true. Faith thus becomes the convinced and convincing advocate of reason.¹¹

7 Thomas E. Woods, May 2, 2005. Comments for the release of his book *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*. <https://www.lewrockwell.com/2005/05/thomas-woods/how-the-catholic-church-built-western-civilization/>

8 Ronald L. Numbers, ed., *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 6.

9 Robert Kurland, “Why Catholics Should Know about Science,” Blog of the Catholic Writers Guild, 12 January 2018. <http://blog.catholicwritersguild.com/2018/01/why-catholics-should-know-about-science.html>

10 Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason), no. 85.

11 Saint John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason), no. 56.

12. We all long to experience what is beautiful, good and true. By allowing faith and reason – which includes science – to coexist and mutually enrich each other, we resist the “fragmentation of meaning” that scientism brings and thereby prevent the fragmentation of our very selves. Faith and reason are not opposed; when joined together they provide us with a fuller knowledge of reality and make us more completely human.

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