

The Christocentrism of Pope John Paul II: Foundations for a “Catholic Integralism”

Lisa Lickona, STL

More than one writer in the field of social science has advocated the Integralism of Pitirim Sorokin as a worthy starting point for development of an epistemology that might serve the work of the Catholic social scientist.¹ Because Sorokin’s Integralism provides a theory of truth that embraces supernatural knowledge and an epistemology that makes room for the act of faith, his theory is of particular interest to Catholic scholars. Commenting on the close correlation between Sorokin’s thought and Russian Christian philosophy, Lawrence Nichols characterizes the relation between Integralism and Catholicism as “complex and ambivalent.”² Points of convergence between Integralism and Catholicism include the concept of creation, as well as the significance of human love. Yet, at the same time, “Integralism lacks a Christology and a notion of a universal church that is ‘one, holy, Catholic and apostolic.’”³ Nevertheless, the fact that Sorokin himself advocated an Integralism that included a Christian perspective leaves the way open for the development of an authentically Catholic epistemological grounding for the social sciences. As Nichols has said, “a Catholic variant might also be cultivated.”⁴

The purpose of this paper is to present the sources for such a “Catholic variant” of Integralism in the works of Pope John Paul II, particularly his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. We will first of all consider the distinctive christocentrism of the current pontificate as it springs from the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. As we will see, in John Paul II’s teaching the ultimate source of the possibility of the integration of faith, reason and science is provided in the very “integration” of the Incarnation: the unity of God and man, without mixture or absorption.

¹ See the collected articles on Integralist Social Science and Catholic Social Thought in the *Catholic Social Science Review*, Volume VI, 2001, pp. 11-55: Lawrence T. Nichols, “Sorokin’s Integralism and Catholic Social Science: Concordance and Ambivalence”; Vincent Jeffries, “Foundational Ideas for an Integral Social Science in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas”; Barry V. Johnston, “Integralism, Altruism, and Social Emancipation: A Sorokinian Model of Prosocial Behavior and Social Organization.”

² Nichols, 21.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 22.

I. Theological Foundations

In order to appreciate John Paul II's teaching in *Fides et Ratio*, we would do well to trace the roots of his thought in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. As a "pastoral" council, Vatican II was a new thing in the history of the Church. Whereas the previous twenty ecumenical councils had been called to address heresy by developing and defining Church doctrine, Vatican II set its sights on a much broader and hence more challenging goal: "to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful."⁵

This call for renewal within the Church's life and the life of each and every Christian reflected the sensitivity of Pope Blessed John XXIII to a peculiarly modern phenomenon, what his successor Paul VI would characterize as the central problem of our time: the split between the gospel and life. In the introduction to the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*) the Council Fathers describe this marginalization of the gospel: a sense that religion is extraneous to full human flourishing, that human existence can be defined without reference to God. A catalog of modern phenomena shows the ambiguity of many of the "achievements" of modern man: the rise of atheism, the growth of science and technology, the rise of modern political movements.⁶ It is particularly important for our purposes here to note the Council's assessment of the "scientific spirit." Certainly, technological advances increase the quality of life, stimulate rapid growth in education and link people in unprecedented ways. And yet at the same time, and often by means of the same technologies, new problems have arisen: wholesale destruction of human life, imbalances of resources that promote national and

⁵Constitution on the Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 1. All citations from Vatican II are taken from *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II*, Douglas G. Bushman, ed. (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1999). For a concise discussion of the theology of the Council, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Council of the Holy Spirit," in *Explorations in Theology, 3: Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 245-67.

⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 4-6.

international discord, migration and destruction of local culture. In the midst of progress new problems emerge that lead man back to the most basic perennial questions.

What is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death which continues to exist despite so much progress? What purpose have these victories purchased at so high a cost? What can man offer to society; what can he expect from it? What follows this earthly life?⁷

In the first chapter of *Gaudium et Spes* the Council Fathers attempt to answer these questions by articulating the full meaning of human dignity in the light of creation and redemption. Man is considered as created in the image of God, composed of body and soul, gifted with the transcendent capacities of reason and will. And in the final article of this chapter, number 22, this teaching about man is revealed, as it were, in its most definitive dimensions, **in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ:**

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of him who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in him all the aforementioned truths find their root and crown.

He who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15; cf. 2 Cor 4:4), is himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam he restores the divine likeness which has been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as he assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect, too. For by his very Incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us.

Commenting on this text, Joseph Ratzinger, then a theological expert to the German bishops, wrote:

We are probably justified in saying that here for the first time in an official document of the magisterium a new type of completely Christocentric theology

⁷ Ibid., n. 10.

appears. On the basis of Christ this dares to present theology as anthropology and only becomes radically theological by including man in discourse about God by way of Christ, thus manifesting the deepest unity of theology. The generally theologically reserved text of the Pastoral Constitution here attains very lofty heights and points the way to theological reflection in our present situation.⁸

Whereas creation and redemption remain somewhat extrinsically related in many passages in *Gaudium et Spes*, Pope John Paul II has in his writings consistently integrated the two through the christocentrism of article 22.⁹ The first words of his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, represent this central theme of the pontificate: “The Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is the center of the universe and of history.” John Paul has placed the mystery of the Incarnation at the very heart of his teaching. Redemption, he affirms, is a “new creation”—a recreation of man as man. And thus, man discovers his own fulfillment through Jesus Christ.

The man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly—and not just in accordance with immediate and even illusory standards and measures of his being—he must with his unrest, uncertainty and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter into him with his whole self, he must “appropriate” and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find himself. If this profound process takes place within himself, he then bears fruit not only of adoration of God but also of deep wonder at himself.¹⁰

Man discovers in Christ not only the fullness of the living God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—but also the fullness of his own human life.

Not surprisingly, *Gaudium et Spes* n. 22 provides a theological foundation for John Paul II’s teaching in the 1999 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*—a document that is a critical starting point for anyone who is seriously considering the role of the Catholic faith in the development and practice of social science. John Paul II’s discussion of the relation between faith and reason in

⁸ Ratzinger, Joseph, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 5, Herbert Vorgrimler, ed. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 159.

⁹ John Paul II has consistently considered the anthropological themes of the first chapter of *Gaudium et Spes* in the context of the christocentrism of *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22: article 14, on man as body and soul has been treated extensively in *The Theology of the Body*; article 15, on the intellect in *Fides et Ratio*; article 16, on conscience in *Veritatis Splendor*; article 17, on freedom, in *Evangelium Vitae*. The list could be extended.

¹⁰ *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 10.

this encyclical is careful and nuanced; here we will only outline some important turns in the argument, especially with regard to christocentrism.

Fides et Ratio opens with a reflection on an ancient philosophical maxim that expresses a fundamental movement in the heart of each human person: “Know thyself.” Every human being seeks to answer basic questions: Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? What is my destiny? And, in turning to ourselves, to understand our purpose and meaning, we cannot help but seek the meaning of the larger whole within which we find ourselves. This search for truth is a fundamental aspect of humanity; indeed John Paul II asserts that, in this sense, every human being is a philosopher.

This fundamental philosophical quest in the heart of each human being can be and, in this modern age, often is obscured by a sense that there is no universal truth, or that such truth is unknowable—relativism or skepticism. The Church, on the other hand, has traditionally affirmed the human desire for truth and the fulfillment of that desire. The Church is concerned with the human desire for truth precisely because she is the bearer of a great mystery that promises to fulfill all human desires: the mystery of the God-man.

In the Incarnation of the Son of God we forged the enduring and definitive synthesis which the human mind of itself could not even have imagined: The eternal enters time, the whole lies hidden in the part, God takes on a human face. The truth communicated in Christ’s revelation is therefore no longer confined to a particular place or culture, but is offered to every man and woman who would welcome it as the word which is the absolutely valid source of meaning for human life.¹¹

In Christ, the Truth becomes a person—and every person who seeks truth is really seeking Him. For John Paul II Jesus Christ is not merely a personal truth, but an objective truth as well. As

¹¹ *FR*, n. 12; cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 1.

Hans Urs von Balthasar has said, Jesus Christ is the “concrete categorical imperative,”¹² and the “norm of history.”¹³

In our search for the grounds for a “Catholic variant” of Integralism this is the truth that must guide us forward: the truth of Jesus Christ, the truth that is Jesus Christ. The Incarnation is the foundation of the possibility of true (Catholic) Integralism.

II. Faith and Reason

It is a lovely vision that John Paul II presents—but one that seems only to raise more questions. What is the role of science in this encounter with the truth? Is there room for knowledge outside of faith? In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II reiterates the Church’s traditional distinction between two modes of knowledge according to their proper object.

The First Vatican Council teaches, then, that the truth attained by philosophy and the truth of revelation are neither identical nor mutually exclusive. . . . Based upon God’s testimony and enjoying the supernatural assistance of grace, faith is of an order other than philosophical knowledge which depends upon sense perception and experience and which advances by the light of the intellect alone. Philosophy and the sciences function within the order of natural reason; while faith, enlightened and guided by the Spirit, recognizes in the message of salvation the “fullness of grace and truth” (cf. Jn 1:14) which God has willed to reveal in history and definitively through his Son, Jesus Christ.¹⁴

John Paul II reads this distinction between faith and reason, however, within the wider context of the conciliar christocentrism. Because the eternal has entered time and the infinite God has become man, man encounters God precisely through matter and history. Creation is “charged with the grandeur of God”—to use Gerard Manley Hopkins’ famous phrase—and thus any

¹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics,” in *Principles of Christian Morality* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 79.

¹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), chapter 3 passim.

¹⁴ *FR*, n. 9. In this section of the encyclical, John Paul also draws on chapter 1 of *Dei Verbum*—another significant christocentric text from the Council.

knowledge of creation implies an encounter with the Creator. Thomas Aquinas has succinctly expressed this truth of natural knowledge: “all knowers know God implicitly in everything that they know.”¹⁵

But faith is a gift, a capacity that enables us to go beyond natural knowledge—and thus we must distinguish faith and the natural knowledge of science. In faith, the object of our knowledge is God, in science it is a specific aspect of the material order. But this does not mean that faith is *extrinsic* to scientific inquiry. Faith is knowing God and then each created reality in God. Science properly practiced is the knowledge of each thing within a larger whole. Therefore science properly practiced is inherently open to the fullness of faith.¹⁶

The world and all that happens within it, including history and the fate of peoples, are realities to be observed, analysed and assessed with all the resources of reason, but without faith ever being foreign to the process. Faith intervenes not to abolish reason’s autonomy nor to reduce its scope for action, but solely to bring the human being to understand that in these events it is the God of Israel who acts. Thus the world and the events of history cannot be understood in depth without professing faith in the God who is at work in them.¹⁷

Thus *Fides et Ratio* challenges the self-understanding of science as “neutral” in relation to any and all belief systems. In a section entitled “Drama of the Separation of Faith and Reason” John Paul II reviews the shifts in thought that have occurred since the late middle ages which have led to the myth of the “objectivity” of science vis-à-vis faith. And he criticizes an empiricism which claims autonomy from any philosophical or theological view.

In the field of scientific research, a positivistic mentality took hold which not only abandoned the Christian vision of the world, but more especially rejected every appeal to a metaphysical or moral vision. It follows that certain scientists, lacking any ethical point of reference, are in danger of putting at the center of their concerns something other than the human person and the entirety of the person’s life. Further still, some of these, sensing the opportunities of technological

¹⁵ *Quaestiones Disputate de Veritate*, 22, 2, ad 1.

¹⁶ Cf. Adrian Walker, “Christ and Cosmology: Methodological Considerations for Catholic Educators.” *Communio* (Fall 2001), p. 444.

¹⁷ *FR*, n. 16.

progress, seem to succumb not only to a market-based logic, but also to the temptation of a quasi-divine power over nature and even over the human being.¹⁸

Science which prematurely closes out the openness to the transcendent that is characteristically human inevitably becomes a “technocratic logic” that destroys humanity.¹⁹

In this context, John Paul II refers to his earlier reflections in *Redemptor Hominis* on the ambivalent achievements of modern science. While granting the achievements of modern science, the pope sees in the many new difficulties that have resulted from science—environmental damage, industrialization, and the creation of weapons of mass destruction—signs of the groaning of creation as it awaits the redemption of Jesus Christ. These achievements—indeed all human endeavors—can reach their fullness only in the person of Jesus Christ. “In Jesus Christ the visible world which God created for man—the world that, when sin entered the world, ‘was subjected to futility’—recovers again its original link with the divine source of Wisdom and Love.”²⁰ Thus John Paul II suggests that man’s encounter with the visible world through science and his mastery of that world through technology is in need of constant **renewal**—a renewal that can only occur in the encounter with Jesus Christ. Such a renewal is one that could and should be at the heart of Catholic Integralism.

III. Catholic Social Science

What form will this renewal of science take? In large part that question can be answered only by scientists themselves—although the christocentrism of John Paul II implies that an integration of faith and reason will affect both content and method.

The Catholic social scientist is able to bring to his or her discipline a content greater than that attainable by human reason and empirical research alone. He is privy to truths that can

¹⁸ *FR*, n. 46.

¹⁹ *FR*, n. 15.

²⁰ *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 8.

further the research in his respective discipline—truths about the dignity of the human person, the dynamic of conscience, the need for love, the necessity of the love of a mother and a father—to name just a few. Perhaps the most striking truth that faith can bring to bear on the social sciences is the truth of the Cross.

The crucified Son of God is the historic event upon which every attempt of the mind to construct an adequate explanation of the meaning of human existence upon merely human argumentation comes to grief. The true key point, which challenges every philosophy is Jesus Christ's death on the cross.... Human wisdom refuses to see in its own weakness the possibility of its strength; yet St. Paul is quick to affirm, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). Man cannot grasp how death could be the source of life and love; yet to reveal the mystery of his saving plan God has chosen precisely that which reason considers "foolishness" and a "scandal."²¹

Over the past three years, John Paul II has given a fine illustration of the importance of this truth in the question of the indissolubility of marriage in his yearly addresses to the Roman Rota, the ordinary tribunal that receives appeals in the name of the pope. The Rota has, as a primary task, the process of reviewing annulments. Although John Paul II is primarily addressing lawyers, his reflections bear directly on the integration of natural and supernatural truth, as well as the role of faith in the practice of one's profession. Studying the pope's teaching can aid us in our development of an authentic Catholic Integralism.

In his January, 2002 address, John Paul II stresses that indissolubility is essential to marriage. Jesus himself points to the natural, created character of indissolubility when he chides the Jews for accepting divorce: "From the beginning it was not so...." (Mt 19:8). Likewise, from the beginning indissolubility was a **good** for man—for the spouses, children, and society. "[T]he good of indissolubility is the good of marriage itself."²² Hence the Catholic lawyer—and here he specifically addresses **civil** lawyers as well—"should always decline the use of their

²¹ *FR*, n. 23.

²² "Address to the Prelate Auditors, Officials and Advocates of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota" (January 28, 2002), n. 4.

profession for an end that is contrary to justice, as is divorce.”²³ Catholic judges and lawyers are to work to further a deeper understanding of the indissolubility of marriage and the injustice that is perpetuated by divorce.

John Paul II challenges lawyers to go beyond the notion that indissolubility detracts from the good of the spouses who are forced to remain in a difficult marriage.

[O]ne must overcome the view of indissolubility as a restriction of the freedom of the contracting parties, and so as a burden that at times can become unbearable. Indissolubility, in this conception, is seen as extrinsic to marriage, as an “imposition” of a norm against the legitimate expectations of the further fulfillment of the person. Add to this the widespread notion that indissoluble marriage is only for believers, who cannot try to “impose” it on the rest of society.²⁴

Continuing his reflections in January of this year, John Paul stresses that while the indissolubility of marriage is natural truth, faith alone can give the best motive for the continuation of a marriage which one or both spouses find difficult.

[T]oday’s mentality asks, “*Why must one spouse always be faithful to the other?*” and this question is transformed into an existential doubt in situations of crisis. Marital difficulties can take various forms, but in the end they all amount to a problem of love. For this reason, the preceding question can be reformulated in this way: why is it always necessary to love the other spouse even when so many apparently justifying reasons would lead one to leave?

Many replies can be given; among the very powerful ones are the good of the children and the good of the entire society, but the most fundamental reply comes though the *recognition of the objectivity of being spouses*, seen as a *reciprocal gift*, made possible and guaranteed by God himself. The ultimate reason, therefore, for the duty of faithful love is none other than what is the basis of the divine covenant with the human person: *God is faithful*. To make possible the fidelity of heart to one’s spouse, even in the hardest cases, one must have recourse to God in the certainty of receiving assistance. The way of mutual fidelity passes, moreover, through an openness to Christ’s charity, which “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things: (1 Cor 13:7). In every marriage the mystery of redemption becomes present, brought about by a

²³ Ibid., n. 9.

²⁴ Ibid., n. 3.

real participation in the Cross of the Savior, accepting the Christian paradox that joins happiness with the bearing of suffering in the spirit of faith.²⁵

In other words, the good of indissolubility is at bottom a good for the spouses who live out the fidelity of the God who is Himself always faithful to His covenant. Man is fulfilled only by giving and receiving this love in the image of his own Creator and Redeemer. Thus, the Cross of Christ gives the ultimate justification for the indissolubility of marriage—and the grace of the Cross alone makes a difficult marriage possible.

The Cross as a fundamental value in the permanence of marriage has significance for studies in sociology, psychology, and anthropology. It affects the scientist's starting point, his or her presuppositions about human nature. We need studies that look at marriage from the perspective of the Cross. What happens in marriages that come to the brink of divorce, but which, through the perseverance of the spouses, survive? How are the spouses changed by such an experience? How are the children affected? In what ways does surviving such an experience make for a better marriage? Quantitative studies need to be designed in such a way that the real values and virtues of married persons are measured. How do you measure happiness? How do you measure adversity? Or fortitude? These challenges for the social scientist must be met with scientific rigor that is infused with the wisdom that the world does not know—a sensibility that comes from a knowledge of who man is, what he is made for and what it is that really makes him happy.

Bringing such truth to bear on the content and methods of the various disciplines is a daunting task—and it requires that professionals not only know the truth of the Cross, but **live it as well**. The Catholic lawyer who strives to realize the full meaning of marriage will necessarily be in a certain tension with established norms and methods in the law. He will be suffering toward a fuller meaning of justice—not only for his own sake but for his own discipline, for the law in general. From the perspective of his colleagues, he may seem to be marginalized by his

²⁵“Address of John Paul II to the Prelate Auditors, Officials and Advocates of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota” (January 30, 2003), n. 5.

Catholic faith. But really, it is his faith that makes him a better lawyer, more true to his own discipline. Indeed, only the lawyer (or psychologist, or sociologist) who has integrated this truth into their own life can see marriage for all that it is.

This example suggests a way forward for Catholic social science—a way of integration and **vocation**. As John Paul II has repeatedly emphasized, sin is present in the world not only as individual moral failing but in the very structure of institutions and systems of thought.²⁶ The “technocratic logic” that grips modern man is one such “structure of sin”—a system of thought which, through the lure of “neutrality” has engendered a widespread skepticism about the truth of being human. According to John Paul II, the results have been devastating. “Sundered from [transcendent] truth, individuals are at the mercy of caprice, and their state as persons ends up being judged by pragmatic criteria based essentially upon experimental data in the mistaken belief that technology must dominate all.”²⁷ In the face of this “system of thought” a thoroughgoing Catholic integralism is not only desirable, but absolutely necessary. As Cardinal Ratzinger suggests, “A radical debate is needed on the essence of science, on truth and on method, on the task of philosophy and its possible paths.”²⁸ The scientist who is able to enter this debate is the one who views his profession as a vocation—as a way to follow Christ. This will no doubt involve the Cross. But what will follow will be better science—and a better world.

²⁶ Cf., for example, *Evangelium Vitae*, nn. 12, 51.

²⁷ *FR*, n. 5.

²⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Faith, Truth and Culture: Reflections on the Encyclical Fides et Ratio* (New York: Traces, 2000), 12.