

## Ryszard Hajduk CSsR

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8012-2184>  
[ryszard.hajduk@uwm.edu.pl](mailto:ryszard.hajduk@uwm.edu.pl)

University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn  
 <https://ror.org/05s4feg49>

## The truth about man and for man. Practical implications of John Paul II's encyclical “Fides et ratio”

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Ryszard Hajduk CSsR — Prof. Th.D., teaches, among others, at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (Poland) and at the Faculty of Theology of St. Paul in Cochabamba (Universidad Católica Boliviana).

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## Abstract

*The truth about man and for man. Practical implications of John Paul II's encyclical "Fides et ratio"*

Twenty-five years ago, John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et ratio* was published, where the question of truth occupies a central place. The task of the Church is to transmit to people the truth revealed by Jesus Christ, which discloses the mystery of God and man, is accessible in faith, and appeals to the intellect to accept it. In these times, dominated by a pragmatic approach to reality, a question arises about the practical, existential meaning of the truth proclaimed by the Church. The content analysis of the papal teaching in "*Fides et ratio*" leads to the conclusion that the truth cannot be reduced to a set of ideas that enrich human cognition. Therefore, the ecclesial 'diakonia' of truth serves human life because it helps man use his freedom properly and leads him to the fullness of humanity. The truth allows man to protect himself from relativism and religious egalitarianism threats. The communication of truth should consider people's needs to perceive it as a precious gift from God, not as a yoke.

**Keywords:** John Paul II, the Church, pastoral ministry, freedom, pragmatism, relativism

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## Abstrakt

*Prawda o człowieku i dla człowieka. Praktyczne implikacje encykliki Jana Pawła II „Fides et ratio”*

Dwadzieścia pięć lat temu ukazała się encyklika Jana Pawła II „*Fides et ratio*”, w której centralne miejsce zajmuje kwestia prawdy. Zadaniem Kościoła jest przekazywać ludziom prawdę objawioną przez Jezusa Chrystusa, która odsłania tajemnicę Boga i człowieka, jest dostępna w wierze i apeluje do intelektu o jej przyjęcie. W obecnych czasach, w których dominuje pragmatyczne podejście do rzeczywistości, pojawia się pytanie o praktyczne, egzystencjalne znaczenie prawdy głoszonej przez Kościół. Przeprowadzona pod tym kątem analiza treściowa nauczania papieskiego w „*Fides et ratio*” prowadzi do wniosku, iż prawdy nie można sprowadzić do zbioru idei, wzbogacających ludzkie poznanie. Kościelna diakonia prawdy służy ludzkiemu życiu, gdyż pomaga człowiekowi właściwie wykorzystać jego wolność i prowadzi go do osiągnięcia pełni człowieczeństwa. Prawda pozwala człowiekowi uchronić się przed zagrożeniami wynikającymi z relatywizmu i egalitaryzmu religijnego. Jej przekaz winien uwzględniać potrzeby ludzi, aby była postrzegana przez nich jako cenny dar Boga, a nie jako jarzmo.

**Słowa kluczowe:** John Paul II, Kościół, duszpasterstwo, wolność, pragmatyzm, relatywizm

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The issue of truth is the main topic of John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et ratio*, published twenty-five years ago.<sup>1</sup> It is primarily about the truth the Church received as a gift. It is the truth that comes from God, preceding all human intellectual pursuits. Its source is the Person of the Son of God, who shows people “who a man is and what he should do to be a man truly.”<sup>2</sup> It is the ultimate truth about human life and its goal, which is salvation.<sup>3</sup> This truth becomes available in faith, sheds light on the mystery of existence, and appeals to the intellect to accept it.<sup>4</sup>

The mission of the Church is to convey to people the truth hidden in the Christian faith. Many contemporaries approach the Church's mission understood in this way with skepticism. In their opinion, the experience of the past century shows that it is impossible to build a civilization defending man and his dignity on the truth proclaimed by Christianity. They point to totalitarian systems and the Holocaust as evidence for this thesis.<sup>5</sup> There is also a widespread belief that no single objective truth exists, or at least humans cannot know it. Ultimately, everyone can intuitively decide what is true for them, and all views have the same value and deserve respect.<sup>6</sup> Then “relativism triumphs, in which the question about the truth of all reality no longer arises, which is, in fact, also a question about God.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the essential criteria for recognizing certain beliefs as truth is their functionality. Nowadays, everything—including scientific research—is subject to the dictatorship of pragmatism. People are not interested in learning about reality if it does not improve their actions and

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1 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, Sep 14, 1998, 2; J. Ratzinger, Enzyklika *Fides et ratio*, „Deutsche Tagespost” 126 (1998), p. 3; B. de León, Algunos sentidos del término “verdad” en la “*Fides et ratio*”, “*Scripta Theologica*” 2 (2002), p. 643.

2 Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe salvi*, Nov. 30, 2007, 6.

3 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 2.

4 F. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Systematic Theology. Task and Methods*, in: *Systematic Theology. Roman Catholic Perspectives*, eds. F. Schüssler Fiorenza, J. P. Galvin, Minneapolis 2011, p. 44.

5 P. Wielgus, *Postmodernizm*, in: *Katecheza wobec wyzwań współczesności*, ed. by R. Czekański, Płock 2001, p. 52; B. C. Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, Minneapolis 2005, p. 4; G. M. Hoff, “Es gibt keinen Gott und wir sind seine Propheten”. *Atheismen des 21. Jahrhunderts*, “*Lebendige Seelsorge*” 6 (2009), p. 381.

6 B. C. Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, p. 26.

7 Francis, Encyclical *Lumen fidei*, Jun 29, 2013, 25.

make them effective.<sup>8</sup> This expectation also appears towards Christianity because many moderns are ready to accept religion only if they can achieve some practical benefit with its help.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, the issue of the relevance and importance of the Church's mission arises, the important goal of which is to bring the light of God's truth to the world. Treating the pragmatic approach of today's people to Christianity as a pastoral challenge, we should look for an answer to the existential meaning of Christ's truth and then about how the Church should understand its ministry defined as the "diakonia of truth."<sup>10</sup> It is led by practical and theological reflection on the teaching of John Paul II in the encyclical *Fides et ratio*, which results in conclusions aimed at adapting the style of communicating truth to both the requirements of the Gospel and human needs.<sup>11</sup> All this allows one to see how the magisterium of John Paul II has been constantly of great value for contemporary man and how valuable a source of inspiration it remains for the pastoral activity of the Church to this day.

## 1. The existential nature of truth

In John Paul II's encyclical, truth is perceived in two basic aspects: as revealed truth<sup>12</sup> or God's truth<sup>13</sup> and as philosophical truth<sup>14</sup>, i.e., truth known due to the activity of the human intellect. The point connecting both "truths" is a man searching for the meaning of life.<sup>15</sup> The revealed truth, coming from God, is addressed to man, who, thanks to his rational abilities, can strive to discover its fullness. God's truth cannot be opposed to the truth revealed in human inquiry because "there is one truth,"<sup>16</sup> and man finds the essence of his existence in their

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8 P. M. Mazanka, *Prawda o osobie ludzkiej w ujęciu personalizmu amerykańskiego*, "Fides et ratio" 4 (2018), p. 97.

9 L. Mödl, *Wenn's ums Überleben geht*, "Klerusblatt" 84 (2004), pp. 200–201.

10 John Paul II, *Encyclical Fides et ratio*, 2.

11 Francis, *Exhortation Amoris laetitia*, Mar 19, 2016, 308.

12 John Paul II, *Encyclical Fides et ratio*, 11, 30, 35, 49, 50, 73, 79, 83, 97, 105.

13 John Paul II, *Encyclical Fides et ratio*, 6, 44, 54, 66.

14 John Paul II, *Encyclical Fides et ratio*, 30, 54.

15 B. de León, *Algunos sentidos del término „verdad” en la “Fides et ratio”*, p. 649.

16 John Paul II, *Encyclical Fides et ratio*, 51.

mutual connection. Therefore, by accepting God's revelation in faith, man comes to the certainty of truth.<sup>17</sup>

The gift of faith, as an obedient response to God, allows us to accept Revelation. It has consequences for human existence. In an act of faith, a person entrusts himself and his mind to God as the guarantor of truth. The intellect will move towards God in faith, resulting in the obligation to live in truth.<sup>18</sup> The gradual encounter with truth develops within the horizon of personal self-awareness: the better a person gets to know reality and the world, the more evidently he sees its uniqueness. The purpose of life becomes increasingly clear to man, and as he enriches his knowledge, he discovers that his deepest desire is to find the truth about himself.<sup>19</sup>

Every human effort to reach the truth indicates his unsatisfied desire for fulfillment. However, only in the light of faith does he learn what the fullness of life is, thanks to which his anxiety ceases, and the uncertainty about the possibility of finding the authentic meaning of existence disappears. Faith answers the question about the origin and vocation of man, who is neither a lonely individual, left to his own devices, nor a being thrown into a world without reason for existence and purpose, but someone who is created to live and to live forever. Man can ultimately discover the significance of his existence in the light of God's truth and thus outside himself.<sup>20</sup>

Modern people consider freedom to be the most important value. For them, appealing to the truth is tantamount to striving to limit freedom. Objective truth is treated as a threat to man because it determines his view of reality and deprives him of the ability to make choices. Proclaiming objective truth is perceived as tantamount to an attempt to

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17 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 13.

18 E. J. Weringer, "Fides et ratio". *The Perpetual Journey of Faith and Reason*, "The Linacre Quarterly" 4 (2000), p. 60.

19 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 1; L. Flamarique, *La defensa de la verdad*. "Fides et ratio", in: *Fe y razón*, eds. M. L. Baixauli, J. de Aranguren, J. J. Borobia, Pamplona 1999, p. 290.

20 E. Jüngel, *Wertlose Wahrheit. Zur Identität und Relevanz des christlichen Glaubens*. *Theologische Erörterungen*, vol. 3, Tübingen 2003, p. 104.

attack the absolute nature of human freedom.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, truth and freedom go hand in hand or die together.<sup>22</sup> Thus, freedom needs truth so that it can be used by people with responsibility and give them a sense of fulfillment. If there is no single truth that unites all people, it is unclear what the true purpose of human freedom is. So, only the truth makes people truly free (cf. Jn 8:32). When human reason is enlightened by truth, man can use his freedom to achieve good.<sup>23</sup>

Truth is not just something that satisfies man's intellectual needs. Unlike the laws and phenomena discovered by natural sciences, truth in its ultimate dimension takes on the character of a call addressed to a human person endowed with freedom. However, it appeals to recognize it as a mystery beyond the capacity of the human mind, as well as to accept it and obediently adapt to the imperatives arising from it. Human freedom is then realized through consent to a life corresponding to the truth, thanks to which man achieves liberation.<sup>24</sup>

The above encyclical clarifies that truth is not only of interest to philosophy, every person, by his nature, asks about the truth.<sup>25</sup> The question about truth appears in the human search for meaning, happiness, and self-fulfillment.<sup>26</sup> Everyday life reveals people's interest in discovering the truth about reality and what is happening in it. Man is the only creature on earth who is not only capable of knowing truth, but also

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21 H.-G. Nissing, "Was ist Wahrheit?". Josephs Ratzingers Einsprüche gegen den Relativismus, in: *Was ist Wahrheit? Zur Kontroverse um die Diktatur des Relativismus*, ed. by H.-G. Nissing, München 2011, p. 21; O. Alves Aguiar, *Philosophia Ancilla Theologiae? A propósito da Encíclica "Fides et ratio"*, do papa João Paulo II, „Revista De Ciências Sociais” 1-2 (2019), p. 135.

22 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 90.

23 L. M. Pastor García, *Reflexiones sobre la Encíclica "Fides et ratio"*, „La Razón Histórica” 15 (2011), p. 15; P. Blanco Sarto, *La teología de Joseph Ratzinger. Una introducción*, Madrid 2011, p. 176.

24 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 90; M. A. Kopiec, *The Main Aspects of John Paul II's Encyclical "Fides et ratio" in the Current Historical and Theological Environment*, „Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny” 1 (2020), p. 124; O. Alves Aguiar, *Philosophia Ancilla Theologiae?*, p. 135.

25 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 64.

26 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 28; H.-G. Nissing, „Was ist Wahrheit?”, p. 23.

knows that he wants to know the truth. Therefore, he does not agree to be fed lies but clings to the truth.<sup>27</sup>

This desire is met by God, who reveals to man the indisputable truth that transcends history and time. Revelation introduces a universal and ultimate truth into human history, inspiring man to seek and explore it constantly. That is why people continuously strive to expand their knowledge and acquire wisdom that soothes their worries and brings happiness of spirit.<sup>28</sup>

Every person wants to find the answer to basic existential questions: “Who am I? Where do I come from, and where am I going? Why does evil exist? What awaits me after this life?”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, these questions reveal that the human person is open to something that transcends him as a rational being. The shape and direction he will give to his life depends on where he finds the answer.<sup>30</sup>

The truth that man longs for cannot be reduced to knowledge; it's more than just specific content. Truth is not merely conceptual apprehensions or verbal reflections of some reality (Thomas Aquinas) or evidence obtained from experience or consensus about a statement about some object (Jürgen Habermas).<sup>31</sup> It reveals what is certain and what transcends the reality available to the human intellect. A force in it pushes man to find what his nature longs for. The truth offers itself to man and draws him to himself so that he can find himself in its light.<sup>32</sup>

God's truth is not a set of definitions of objects that fill reality but—first of all—defines the purpose of his life, showing him the path leading to happiness and perfection. Thanks to it, he learns authentic values, the implementation of which allows him to become better and fully develop his nature.

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27 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 25.

28 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 6; J. M. Barrio Maestre, *La filosofía como búsqueda de la verdad. Un comentario a la “Fides et ratio”*, “Acta Philosophica” 2 (2004), p. 273; L. Flamarique, *La defensa de la verdad. “Fides et ratio”*, p. 293.

29 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 1.

30 J. M. Barrio Maestre, *La filosofía como búsqueda de la verdad*, p. 272.

31 E. Arens, *Zur Struktur theologischer Wahrheit*, “Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie” 1 (1990), p. 3.

32 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 2; B. de León, *Algunos sentidos del término “verdad” en la “Fides et ratio”*, p. 652.

The truth of these values is to be found not by turning in on oneself but by opening oneself to apprehend that truth even at levels which transcend the person. This is an essential condition for us to become ourselves and to grow as mature, adult persons.<sup>33</sup>

The ultimate goal of human pursuits is God. Man seeks the truth, and the truth is God. Since man is not God, his relation to truth can never be reduced to possessing it. A person with limited cognitive abilities cannot have unlimited, complete knowledge. However, lack of full knowledge does not mean ignorance. Pursuing comprehensive knowledge—so deeply rooted in human nature—is not in vain. “The first answer is the ability to seek the truth and ask questions. Man would not seek what he was unaware of or considered completely unattainable. Only hoping to get answers can make him take the first step.”<sup>34</sup> Man is the only creature on earth that can seek the truth. A person who sincerely seeks the truth with his whole heart and pure mind is already on the right path. In this circumstance, the way itself is already the goal.<sup>35</sup>

Man reaches the truth not only through his intellect. He can discover the truth about his own existence, which exceeds his cognitive capabilities, when he allows himself to be found. It happens when it is passed from person to person. A person reaches it in spirit by entering into relationships with other people who are credible as transmitters of certain and authentic truth. He then finds the answer to what “deep down in his heart he already recognizes as the truth and what he has been looking for for a long time.”<sup>36</sup>

When truth becomes a common goal for people, “they can overcome divisions and strive to know the whole truth, traveling the paths that only the Spirit of the Risen Christ knows.”<sup>37</sup> Truth as *logos* leads to *dialogos*—meeting, communication, and communion. “When the truth

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33 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 25.

34 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 29.

35 J. Gnilka, *Johannesevangelium*, Würzburg 1989, p. 112; M. A. Kopiec, *The Main Aspects of John Paul II's Encyclical "Fides et ratio" in the Current Historical and Theological Environment*, s 113.

36 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 32; B. de León, *Algunos sentidos del término "verdad" en la "Fides et ratio"*, p. 647.

37 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 92.

frees people from opinions and subjective views, it allows them to rise above cultural and historical conditions and meet at the level of assessing the value and essence of things.”<sup>38</sup> Truth can unite all those who strive for it—even if they look for it only within themselves and are critical of the existence of objective and absolute truth.<sup>39</sup> When the dialogue brings up the deepest and most important issues for each person, a community of spirit can be born, filled with respect for other people and readiness to learn about their position, in which there is no room for indoctrination, manipulation, and demonstrating superiority towards others.<sup>40</sup>

Many modern people treat the issue of knowing the truth, thanks to God's Revelation, as a purely theoretical issue with no practical consequences.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, the proper place for truth is not only intellectual speculation. It also has practical and existential value. It is a principle and criterion for assessing human action in society, culture, politics, and economics.<sup>42</sup> It allows a person to gain moral certainty when deciding on issues fundamental to his life. This knowledge implies all important dimensions of human existence: intelligence, memory, will, feelings, senses, body, and the world of spiritual and ethical values. Only then does the truth revealed to people by God achieve its goal when it perfects human nature, shapes social relationships, and contributes to the multiplication of good in the world.<sup>43</sup>

## 2. Church – servant of truth

The truth of God, transmitted to the world through Christianity, was revealed in the historical Person of Jesus Christ, who lives in his Church

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<sup>38</sup> Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, Jun 29, 2009, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Vatican Council II, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, Dec 7, 1965, 92; John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 107.

<sup>40</sup> Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, 4.

<sup>41</sup> E. Jüngel, *Wertlose Wahrheit*, p. 92; H.-G. Nissing, “Was ist Wahrheit?”, p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, 2–3; H.-G. Nissing, “Was ist Wahrheit?”, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 4; M. A. Kopiec, *The Main Aspects of John Paul II's Encyclical “Fides et ratio” in the Current Historical and Theological Environment*, p. 125; J. M. Barrio Maestre, *La filosofía como búsqueda de la verdad*, p. 276.

and constantly draws people to himself as the perfect source of understanding reality.<sup>44</sup> Jesus Christ—the incarnate Logos and the resurrected Lord—is Truth in Person. The Church serves the truth when it recalls the words of Jesus, who announces the truth to people (cf. Jn 8:40, 44; 16:7) and bears witness to the truth (cf. Jn 18:37). In Him you can see and hear the truth. The truth revealed in the Person of Jesus reveals Satan’s lie and frees us from him (cf. Jn 8:32).<sup>45</sup>

The Church’s vocation is to reveal to people “the truth of Christ, which is crowned by his Paschal Mystery: only in Christ is it possible to know the fullness of the truth that saves (cf. Acts 4:12; 1 Tm 2:4–6).”<sup>46</sup> Revealing himself in Christ, God does not oppose what human reason seeks. Moreover, revealed truth can only be accepted by a person endowed with intellect. Faith assumes the existence of reason, needs it, as well as defends it. Faith is trust in the Truth—the divine Logos. In this sense, faith—like reason—turns to truth, and it is Christ himself, towards whom all human searches for truth are ultimately aimed.<sup>47</sup>

The mission of the Church in the world is to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to all people, adapting the message of salvation to their cognitive capabilities.<sup>48</sup> The proclamation of the Gospel is essentially the proclamation of “the word of truth” (cf. 2 Cor 6:7), which gives people a new existence, “creates facts and transforms life.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, man discovers his destiny and goal, which is to remain in communion with God. By serving the truth, the Church reveals to people the way to the truth as

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44 J. Gnilka, *Johannesevangelium*, p. 112; J. Aznar-Sala, *La encíclica “Fides et ratio” XX años después (1998–2018)*, “*Revista Iberoamericana de Teología*” 28 (2019), p. 31.

45 E. Arens, *Zur Struktur theologischer Wahrheit*, p. 11; Ch. Dietzfelbinger, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, vol. 1, Zürich 2001, p. 255.

46 John Paul II, *Encyclical Fides et ratio*, 99.

47 John Paul II, *Encyclical Veritatis splendor*, Aug 6, 1993, 83; J. M. Barrio Maestre, *La filosofía como búsqueda de la verdad*, p. 269; L. M. Pastor García, *Reflexiones sobre la Encíclica “Fides et ratio”*, p. 13.

48 Vatican Council II, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes*, 44; J. Ratzinger, *Eklezjologia Soboru Watykańskiego II*, in: *Kościół—ekumenizm—polityka*, ed. by L. Balter, Poznań–Warszawa 1990, p. 17 (Kolekcja Communio, 5).

49 Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Spe salvi*, 2.

a source of authentic knowledge and priceless wisdom that they cannot acquire on their own.<sup>50</sup>

Christianity is the only religion whose constitutive element is neither a book nor a teaching but a personal relationship.<sup>51</sup> Christ as a person is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (cf. Jn 14:5), and his imitation of Christ is a way of Christian existence. By proclaiming Christ to the world, the Church meets man as a relational being who strives for union with God. Man is not only looking for some truth “reified” or enclosed in concepts but is focused on meeting the living Truth. In the person of Christ, it is a value that meets him,<sup>52</sup> illuminates his path, and “gives life a new perspective and thus a decisive direction.”<sup>53</sup> In an encounter with Jesus, full life is revealed to man and a path that can be safely followed in mortality. The Son of God exposes the way, walks it first, and constantly strengthens people with his presence in faithfully implementing His truth in everyday life.<sup>54</sup>

Knowing the truth in the person of the Son of God leads to loving it, and thus to love Jesus himself, in whom God’s love, and with it the truth, took on a human form. Loving God gives people in Christ his truth because he is Love, and this wants to give them a share in the fullness of life, introducing them into a relationship with the One who is Life, Love, and Truth.<sup>55</sup> God’s gift provokes man to respond. Knowing the truth about God, who is Love, compels us to love Him. Then love also leads a person to identify with the One he loves, which in practice means wanting the same thing as the Beloved and rejecting the same thing together.<sup>56</sup> By loving God, however, man becomes more and more like Jesus Christ,

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50 M. B. Yarnell, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine*, Nashville 2007, p. 68; P. W. Hahn, *Covenant and Communion. The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI*, Grand Rapids 2009, p. 84; M. A. Kopic, *The Main Aspects of John Paul II’s Encyclical “Fides et ratio” in the Current Historical and Theological Environment*, p. 126.

51 W. Beinert, *Befreiende Wahrheit*, “*Stimmen der Zeit*” 4 (2002), p. 263.

52 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 7.

53 Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus caritas est*, Dec 25, 2005, 1.

54 B. de León, *Algunos sentidos del término „verdad” en la “Fides et ratio”*, p. 663; H.-G. Link, *Wahrheit*, in: *Theologisches Begrifflexikon zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 2, eds. L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, H. Bietenhard, Wuppertal 1979, p. 1351.

55 Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe salvi*, 27.

56 Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus caritas est*, 17.

and thus, his life becomes an increasingly perfect realization of the truth.<sup>57</sup>

Hence, by Christ's will, the Church is to reveal to people the path to salvation. It does so when it shows man the fundamental truths about his existence: the spirituality and immortality of the soul, the ability to do good and obey the natural moral law, the ability to formulate truthful judgments, and the freedom and dignity of the human person.<sup>58</sup> The truth proclaimed by the Church is identical to the message of redemption, which is, in its essence, the liberation of people from the slavery of evil, including lies, so that they can live in the truth (cf. Phil 4:8), as well as and in the freedom and faithfulness of the children of God (cf. Gal 4:7).<sup>59</sup> The one who accepts the gift of Christ's redemption and allows himself to be embraced by the truth becomes a participant in the salvation that was achieved once and for all in Christ.

The Church, which proclaims the truth of Christ to people, serves man by meeting his desire to know himself. He achieves this by accepting God's truth, which is revealed to him when the Divine Logos itself offers itself to him as a gift. This gift demands a response from man, stimulating his intellect and will to make a conscious, free, and responsible act of faith.<sup>60</sup> Pointing to Christ as the embodiment of the truth about God and man, the Church presents the most perfect model of humanity.<sup>61</sup> The truth of the Gospel is consistent with the deepest aspirations of human nature, and the consequence of accepting it in faith is a more human life. Thus, through her service in the world, the Church contributes to the promotion of authentic humanism. The truth communicated to the world by the Church is like a mirror in which man can see his most beautiful face (cf. James 1:23). It appeals to people to strive to become more

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57 B. de León, *Algunos sentidos del término "verdad" en la "Fides et ratio"*, p. 663.

58 J. Ratzinger, *Enzyklika Fides et ratio*, p. 3.

59 M. A. Kopiec, *The Main Aspects of John Paul II's Encyclical "Fides et ratio" in the Current Historical and Theological Environment*, p. 111; J. Ardui, *Truth, Rock Music and Christianity. Can Truth Be Maintained in the Dialogue Between Theology and Rock Music?*, in: *Theology and the Quest for Truth. Historical- and Systematic-theological Studies*, eds. M. Lamberigts, L. Boeve, T. Merrigan, Leuven 2006, p. 209.

60 M. A. Kopiec, *The Main Aspects of John Paul II's Encyclical "Fides et ratio" in the Current Historical and Theological Environment*, p. 110.

61 John Paul II, *Encyclical Redemptor hominis*, Mar 4, 1979, 8.

and more like the Creator. He calls them to make an effort of spiritual transformation and to implement in their lives what they receive in the message of the Gospel. God's truth is a light for man that allows him to free himself from the illusion that he is the absolute master of himself, from focusing only on himself, and from the false belief that his possibilities are unlimited.<sup>62</sup>

Through the Church, God addresses people to convey to them his deepest secrets in a way adapted to their level of understanding.<sup>63</sup> The revelation of God's truth does not make man a passive recipient of the content nor exempt him from seeking an ever deeper understanding of it. Pope John Paul II, in this context, emphasizes the role of theologians in the Church, whose important task is to help people understand "God's kenosis, which is a great mystery for the human mind, which finds it difficult to understand that suffering and death can express love that, without demanding anything, in return, he gives himself as a gift."<sup>64</sup> This truth, however, is of great importance not only in the perspective of faith in redemption as a work of love expressed in the humility of the Son of God, offering his life for sinners, but also because of man's vocation to love his brothers, even to the point of giving his life for them (cf. 1 Jn 3, 16). Then God's truth is reflected in the attitude of Christ's disciples, who confirm their faith in God—Love with their love for their neighbors, and thus certify by their actions the truthfulness of the words they preach.<sup>65</sup>

### 3. Communicating Christian truth in the modern world

The encyclical *Fides et ratio* refers to the first centuries of Christianity when it was considered *religio vera*—the victory of knowledge and truth.<sup>66</sup> The faith of Christ is spreading throughout the world because it is a true philosophy that reaches the truth. Its source is the Divine Logos. In this sense, all truth has a divine origin. In Jesus, people receive perfect knowledge of it. Whoever accepts the revealed truth with faith

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62 B. de León, *Algunos sentidos del término "verdad" en la "Fides et ratio"*, pp. 653–654.

63 John Paul II, *Encyclical Fides et ratio*, 94.

64 John Paul II, *Encyclical Fides et ratio*, 93.

65 Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Deus caritas est*, 16.

66 John Paul II, *Encyclical Fides et ratio*, 37–38.

becomes a philosopher. Philosophy is an academic discipline and the art of living and dying properly, which can only be acquired in the light of God's truth.<sup>67</sup>

According to Joseph Ratzinger, from the very beginning, the strength of Christianity's conviction lies in the combination of faith with reason and action expressed in selfless and sacrificial love, that is, in generous care for the suffering, the poor, and the weak (*caritas*).<sup>68</sup> Christianity is a synthesis of reason, faith, and life. It is not an ideology that looks at man only in some selected aspect of his existence but a truth that covers all dimensions of his presence and a path that allows him to achieve the fullness of life.<sup>69</sup>

However, as the recently deceased Pope Benedict XVI notes, this synthesis is no longer convincing today. In his opinion, this results from today's widespread belief that the truth is hidden and inaccessible. As for knowing the truth and God himself, there is never certainty; a person can only form opinions. Moreover, God's great mystery cannot be reduced to one figure. Many paths lead to God's truth, and man can always discover only part of it.<sup>70</sup> Yet, this approach to the Truth leads to the so-called religious egalitarianism, according to which all religions are equal and the instructions of each of them regarding achieving salvation are of equal value. Each religion has its own path to the ultimate goal, its own myths, and even its own "savior." No matter what beliefs they profess, every person can find something of truth in any religion and achieve salvation.<sup>71</sup>

In such an ideological and religious context, Christianity, with its saving message, is treated as one of many paths that cannot aspire to proclaim objective and absolute truth. Proclaiming Jesus as the only Savior

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67 J. Ratzinger, *Wahrheit des Christentums?*, in: *Weg und Weite. Festschrift für Karl Lehmann*, ed. by A. Raffelt, Freiburg im Breisgau 2001, p. 636; E. G. Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire. Identity and Adaptability*, Macon 1981, pp. 259–262.

68 J. Ratzinger, *Wahrheit des Christentums?*, p. 638.

69 John Paul II, *Encyclical Fides et ratio*, 107; L. M. Pastor García, *Reflexiones sobre la Encíclica Fides et ratio*, p. 11.

70 J. Ratzinger, *Wahrheit des Christentums?*, p. 639; R. Lenaers, *Der Traum des Königs Nebukadnezar. Das Ende einer mittelalterlichen Kirche*, Kleve 2010, p. 37.

71 A. Dulles, *Evangelization for the Third Millennium*, New York 2009, p. 85; H.-G. Nissing, "Was ist Wahrheit?", p. 20.

of the world then means a lack of tolerance for other beliefs. Moreover, it manifests the haughtiness of Christ's followers towards other religions, their symbols, and wisdom. The best thing the Church could do in such a situation is to step aside, timidly adding her voice to the chorus of those who are convinced of the value and truthfulness of the (religious) beliefs they proclaim.

Objections to Christian truth also arise when it seems to people to be too demanding, binding, and limiting.<sup>72</sup> The term "absolute truth" apparently has an oppressive flavor; behind it lies the desire to impose a specific view of reality on others. The Church, which proclaims objective and final truth to people, is an attack on human freedom because it leaves people no choice—the absolute, unique, and indisputable truth excludes the existence of other truths and forces people to accept it if they do not want to live in a lie.<sup>73</sup> People who believe that Christianity cannot help them properly shape their everyday lives also distance themselves from the truth proclaimed by the Church. In their opinion, it declares content not adapted to modern times because it belongs to the pre-scientific era, to a culture dominated by heteronomous ways of thinking.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, today's people are interested in what gives them autonomy and subjectivity in action, is useful in life, and guarantees success. The basic criterion for the acceptance of truth is currently its relevance.<sup>75</sup>

Can aversion to the truth proclaimed by Christianity and the fear of considering it as final and absolute weaken the Church's enthusiasm to transmit it? If the truth is one and objective, it does not cease to be so, regardless of the opinions and attitudes of people living in a given era and culture. Yet, today's scientific progress humanity boasts of is not an opponent of truth but its ally when it helps people learn about the objective

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72 M. Kehl, *Kirche in der Fremde. Zum Umgang mit der gegenwärtigen Situation der Kirche*, in: *Wozu Kirche? Wozu Gemeinde? Kirchenvisionen*, eds. G. Koch, J. Pretschner, Würzburg 1994, p. 49.

73 H. Schöndorf, *Ist die Wahrheit intolerant?*, „*Stimmen der Zeit*” 2 (2009), p. 128.

74 R. Lenaers, *Der Traum des Königs Nebukadnezar*, p. 28.

75 M. Albus, *Kirche nach dem Infarkt. Von der Zukunft der Religion*, Gütersloh 2007, p. 69; M. Wildl, *Die Lebensrelevanz des Evangeliums erschließen. Ökumene angesichts postmoderner Religiositäten*, „*Theologisch-Praktische Quartalschrift*” 1 (2006), p. 26.

state of affairs.<sup>76</sup> However, searches in the field of natural sciences or humanities do not provide an answer to the question about the value of human existence and his final destiny. The Church proclaims this truth to the world, aware that faith and reason need each other to discover the essence of things and the secrets of human existence. Thus, there is no evangelization effectiveness or certainty of faith without appeal to the intellect and its cognitive abilities. Proclaiming the Christian truth continues to be an urgent challenge, even in times of intense search for new technical solutions, because people still need the truth about the purpose and meaning of life.<sup>77</sup>

In his encyclical, John Paul II draws attention to the fact that many paths lead to the truth. At the same time, he emphasizes that “since Christian truth has saving value, one can follow any of these paths, provided that they lead to the ultimate goal, that is, the revelation of Jesus Christ.”<sup>78</sup> The truth that is the goal of the human search is one; therefore, the Church cannot deny Jesus and give up the proclamation of the truth revealed by Him. Respect for man—everyone without exception, even those who think differently, seek or wander—cannot mean giving up proclaiming the truth, of which the Church is not the owner, but a servant. Hence, there is no room for demonstrating his superiority over others in his activities. The Church’s mission should be characterized by humility and humility because only in this way can it “continue the work of Christ himself, who came into the world to bear witness to the truth, to save, not to judge, to serve, not to be served.”<sup>79</sup>

Christian truth, defined as absolute and objective, does not threaten human freedom; on the contrary, it sustains and guarantees its respect. It is a universal truth, pure and independent of other factors, individual desires, or interests. This type of truth can never be subordinated to anyone and is no one’s property because it is above what is private and individual. No one can appropriate it and dispose of it. It can only

76 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 25.

77 L. M. Pastor García, *Reflexiones sobre la Encíclica „Fides et ratio”*, p. 13; R. Inglehart, *Modernisierung und Postmodernisierung. Kultureller, wirtschaftlicher und politischer Wandel in 43 Gesellschaften*, Frankfurt am Main 1998, p. 471.

78 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 38.

79 Vatican Council II, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et spes*, 3.

be recognized and respected. Therefore, any attempt to control or lift it would attack its absolute and transcendent character.

However, the Church does not intend to enslave anyone by proclaiming absolute truth. Transmitting the truth requires “doing” it, respecting the dignity of a man endowed with intellect and free will. Since God’s truth answers the deepest desires and human needs, it must not be imposed on anyone. It corresponds to human nature, and man can know and accept it as a rational and free subject.<sup>80</sup> When conveying the truth to someone, you cannot try to take over the other person by using propaganda tricks or any special rhetorical means. Various forms of manipulation, inducing fear, censorship, or the so-called black PR, use lies to deceive and enslave people. The Church that preaches the truth is never about subjugating another person to itself but about giving him the truth that will allow him to use his freedom in such a way that he can achieve full humanity and find happiness.<sup>81</sup>

As presented earlier, Christian truth has an existential character. Hence, in people’s eyes, it is something alien, anachronistic, exotic, and far from life. It is because it is communicated to people in the wrong way. It is not only about clichéd, empty formulas, complicated trains of thought, or theological terms incomprehensible to people but also about the tone of the Christian message. If Christian truth is liberating, it cannot be presented to people as a factor complicating moral choices and a yoke depriving them of life’s joy.<sup>82</sup> Living in a pluralized reality, in which worldviews and values compete with each other, and moral relativism and permissivism take away the certainty of the correctness of the decisions made, people look for support to free themselves from the burden of contingency.<sup>83</sup> Truth helps as a light that allows a person to discern as fully as possible and make rational and responsible decisions. Then people discover its binding nature, the source of which is no longer just some external instance endowed with exceptional authority,

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80 John Paul II, *Encyclical Fides et ratio*, 4.

81 G. Weigel, *Katedra i sześcian. Europa, Stany Zjednoczone i polityka bez Boga*, Warszawa 2005, p. 88.

82 Francis, *Exhortation Amoris laetitia*, 62.

83 N. Luhmann, *Funkcja religii*, Kraków 1998, pp. 181–202; H. Haslinger, *Das Handeln des Menschen zwischen System und Lebenswelt*, in: *Handbuch Praktische Theologie. Durchführungen*, t. 2, ed. by H. Haslinger, Mainz 2000, p. 192.

but the inner power of conviction hidden in the truth, the clarity of argumentation and compliance with their deepest desire “to achieve the unquestionable truth that has absolute value.”<sup>84</sup>

At the center of the Christian message is always Christ, the Truth and Redeemer. Therefore, the Church cannot forget that His role in people’s lives should not be limited to transmitting catechetical content and teaching moral principles. Thus, the mission of the Church is to bear witness to the truth, following the example of Jesus, and this is something different than presenting the results of scientific research or reproducing the definitions it has adopted. Man is not only an intellect, and the delight in the Christian truth is possible only when embodied in an encounter with a Person, the Risen and Living Lord, who loves man and is with him daily to enlighten, strengthen, and liberate him.<sup>85</sup>

For the truth of Christ to liberate people, the Church that proclaims it must consider man and his life, and in it what limits his personal development and what enslaves him: sin, sadness, inner emptiness, or isolation.<sup>86</sup> Such service initiates life processes that allow people to discover the essence of the Christian faith, which “gives truth as a way, and only as a way does it become human truth. Truth as mere knowledge, as a very idea, has no power. It becomes man’s truth only as a path that places demands on him, on which he can and must enter.”<sup>87</sup> It is not the path of a loner but of a community member who realizes the truth in his life and thus bears witness to it, showing the world an alternative model of existence for the modern era.<sup>88</sup>

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In his encyclical *Fides et ratio*, John Paul II displays that God’s truth, proclaimed by the Church, cannot be separated from life. Just as Jesus Christ, Truth takes on a human body and offers people the truth in their humanity, so the truth proclaimed by the Church wants to be

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84 John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 27.

85 Francis, Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Nov 24, 2013, 164.

86 Francis, Exhortation *Christus vivit*, Mar 25, 2019, 119.

87 J. Ratzinger, *Wprowadzenie w chrześcijaństwo*, Kraków 1970, p. 58.

88 J. Ratzinger, *Comunicazione e cultura. Nuovi percorsi per l’evangelizzazione nel Terzo Millennio*, „Nuova Umanità” 1 (2003), p. 5.

constantly incarnate in the life of the world. Christianity does not bring people a set of lofty ideas and instructive stories. Still, the testimony of a living God and his presence in their history allows people to look at human existence and the surrounding reality from God's perspective and inspires them to act following the truth. It does not depend on the level of human knowledge and does not change under the influence of fashion, philosophical trends, or ideologies promoted in the world. It is a certain, transcendent, objective, and universal truth. Only this value exposes people to the path to the fullest of life.

Many people reject the truth proclaimed by the Church because they fear losing their freedom and independence. *Zeitgeist* forces us to view human freedom as an absolute value to which truth is to be subordinated, which means questioning or privatizing it. In these circumstances, the Church proclaims God and only truth is accused of fear of freedom. Meanwhile, his calling is to reveal to man the truth that liberates. The truth found its embodiment in Christ—the only Redeemer of man. Hence, Christianity is essentially a religion of freedom. People who want it will find it in following Jesus.

It is, therefore, important that the teaching and pastoral activity of the Church puts the event of Jesus and His work of liberation first rather than definitions and norms, duties and procedures. Freedom—like truth—is a gift of God. Then, they are not in opposition to each other. The Church is a servant of truth and freedom by proclaiming Jesus and his work of salvation to the world.

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