

# **THEOLOGIA**

## **Digging Deeper**

*George B. Wilson*

**F**IDES QUAERENS INTELLECTUM. The phrase might be recognised even by people who are all but unversed in Latin. It was St Anselm's motto, a succinct way of defining *theologia*. It slides smoothly off the tongue, a benefit that doubtless contributed to its wide circulation across the ages. Anselm seems to have mastered the Madison Avenue practice of 'branding' long before that famous street ever existed.

*Faith seeking understanding* is the straightforward way the phrase is ordinarily translated. Fair enough: the translation does render faithfully the minimum meaning of the original. But how much of its potential for rich spiritual meaning has been sacrificed in the laudable effort at concision? If we were to mine the deeper vein of ore hidden within the phrase, what gold might we uncover?

In the first place, we might note that the verbatim transposition leaves out the agent who engages in the act of theologizing. According to such a reading, *fides* has no home in a human being; it is rather some sort of free-floating, bloodless abstraction. In reality, theology is both the act and the product of a process that engages a flesh-and-blood human person. Its reality is conditioned by all the other variables that shape the unique spirit of the person challenged by its demands.

Besides obscuring the significance of the person who is pulled back and forth by the questions that inevitably arise in the enterprise, I would suggest that each of the three words in the motto calls for further elaboration. Why? Because the power of each is easily diluted through frequent repetition in the vernacular. We can lose the profound contribution they might bring to our life in the Spirit. What if we were to slow the rush of easy usage and, instead, pause to inhale their rich meaning, one by one?

But before we engage the terms themselves, I need to add a note on my method. In the reflections that follow I will retain the original Latin words rather than their English versions. Why? It is a way of signalling

*The Way*, 56/1 (January 2017), 89–93

**read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)**

that, over the years, the stereotypical English translation of each word may have inadvertently gathered to itself associations that obscure or even distort the power of the original Latin. Over time, errant assumptions attach to traditional concepts, much as barnacles gradually grow and cling to the bottom of a lovely but unattended boat.

### **Fides**

To *fides*, then: this is all too commonly identified with ‘belief’, which is itself frequently further shrivelled into a purely mental activity. At its worst, the whole business is then transmuted into ‘*the faith*’—represented, practically, by a body of propositions which have, in common parlance, been ‘handed down’. *Fides* comes to mean ‘I assent to a body of propositions put before me by a religious institution as a condition for membership’. Dry bones indeed. In that shrivelling process three essential components of *fides* have been lost.



The Pentecost, by Pier Francesco  
Mazzucchelli, c.1615

The first thing that slips away is the appreciation that *fides* comes to the believer in the form of *gift*. The reality is not some object we might happen to find along the roadside. Nor is it something earned by human labour, much less an object we have fashioned. In the Christian view of life within which the reality of *fides* is situated, it arrives as something freely given and received: a light—or even a fire—from without. It comes as a new energy infusing a human, embodied person.

That *fides* involves the human intellect is doubtless true. But surely the human commitment it represents engages more than just our intellect. The second reality

blurred by the pedestrian translation is that *fides* is a form of *life*. The acceptance of the gift calls for a whole reorientation of one's being. The human person becomes newly situated within the swirling energies of the cosmos. The acceptance of the gift results not merely in a consciousness illuminated but a person transformed. 'Everything old has passed away' (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The awesomeness of the gift becomes clearer still with the recognition of the giver: the one whose life is poured out in the giving, Jesus, the Christ. *Fides* is the beginning of an interpersonal relationship, a sharing of human and beyond-human energies with an embodied person who once walked the roads of Galilee and, through his resurrection, has broken the limits of time and space, engaging intimately—now—in the life of each one who accepts his gift of himself.

And that gift brings with it a further relationship that is left unnamed in the traditional definition: the gift links its recipient to the whole body of Jesus' followers, the people of 'the Way'. *Fides* is not the possession of an isolated individual, clasp it in the corner of a secluded nook (or of someone buried in a computer in a wi-fi-enabled library cubicle, for that matter). It is social in its essence because, in responding to Jesus the Gift, the believer is inserted into the web of all life in a new way. The gift of *fides* brings with it the blessings, but also the challenges, of moving beyond ourselves and into a human community. The contours of the gift and our response to it are inescapably conditioned by the needs and offerings of those with whom we walk the Way. Life lived out of *fides* is ecclesial: energy is put to mission with other followers similarly blessed. A me-and-Jesus spirituality represents a distorted response to the gift of *fides*.

### **Intellectum**

What are we to say then of the *intellectum* that might satisfy the urging of *fides*?

The gift that is *fides* may be enriching but it is also unsettling. It shapes us and enables us to walk in a new way in this world. But the light it provides is not sight. The light does not bring the kind of certitude that compels assent and ends the journey. It does not allow us to settle down. Instead, it brings with it a further impulse—but towards what? The easy answer, the goal indicated in the common translation, is 'understanding': 'Faith seeking understanding'.

Once again, the temptation is to reduce the end to a purely mental achievement. At its worst, this desiccating takes the form of parsing concepts—or not even concepts, but mere ‘terms’. The sense of wonder and gratitude evoked by the original gift, not to mention its connection with a Giver, evaporates. Gospel becomes dissertation.

If the gift of *fides* was, in its origins, a newly incarnate form of life, the *intellectum* that is its aim must be equally enfleshed. *Intellectum* is cognitive in nature, to be sure—but not solely. As evocative as the term ‘understanding’ is, it is too limited to convey what the impulse invites us to. We are dealing with a relationship to a person, after all. How are we to describe what the fuller appreciation of a personal relationship with Jesus the Christ brings? ‘Insight’, perhaps? ‘Personal transformation?’ ‘Intimacy?’ Whatever imperfect term we may settle on, the quest initiated by *fides* embraces all the facets of human growth at once: fascination, attraction, energy, intuition, imagination, sensory awareness, vitality, wonder, the fulfilment of human desire, insight—all that we imply when we speak of *the spirit*. Henri Bergson attempts to capture the reality with his *élan vital*. John and Paul put the matter simply: ‘love’. If what is called ‘theology’ does not impel its practitioner into the mystery of love, one of two things is going on. Either the originating impulse was not really *fides*, or else the person who started out on the pilgrimage was seduced along the way by some shiny object and took a detour towards a different goal.

At this point I have a confession to make. In my effort to mine the two nouns in Ambrose’s motto—*fides* as the beginning impulse and *intellectum* as its satisfying term—I almost overlooked what is the key to the whole enterprise: the nature of the drive at work all along the way.

### **Quaerens**

The pedestrian translation in this case is ‘seeking’. *Fides* seeking *intellectum*. And indeed, ‘seeking’ involves the effort to eliminate a gap of some sort. The correlative term for seeking—‘finding’—can be exciting or even thrilling. But everything depends on the quality of the seeking. Sometimes we may find a thing haphazardly, with no prior search on our part. Such an experience has its own form of excitement, but it is surely another matter entirely when gold is discovered after a passionate search.

If theology originates with God’s action in communicating divine life in Jesus, to describe its appropriate response as ‘seeking’ sounds much

too bland, too generic. The *quaerens* that issues out of the gift of *fides* is not a dispassionate looking-for-something. It is rather the panting, sweaty energy of the deer about to expire if it cannot reach the clear stream that alone can slake its thirst. It is the feverish energy of the woman whose last coin has gone missing. It is the pent-up energy of the diver who holds out for one final second before the pearl miraculously appears. Augustine famously gave us the picture of a heart—‘restless’ until it is led to peace by the One who stirred it in the first place. And centuries before him



The Parable of the Lost Drachma, by Domenico Fetti, 1618–1622

Luke caught the essence of *quaerens* in the words of the disciples who experienced the power of his presence on the way to Emmaus: ‘Were not our hearts *burning* within us?’ (24:32)

These musings have brought us a long way from ‘faith seeking understanding’. Perhaps too far? Might Anselm have a reasonable case that I am guilty of fraudulent misrepresentation of his brand? Perhaps. To face such a formidable adversary on such a charge in court would be daunting indeed. My only defence lies in the reminder that Anselm was not only a theologian but, more importantly, a genial saint. He would probably cavil with some of my phrasing. But it is my fond hope that he would appreciate my core concern: *caritas Christi urget nos*.

**George Wilson SJ** is a retired ecclesiologist and church consultant living in Cincinnati, Ohio.