

Metaphysics vs. The Enlightenment

Metaphysics: “By faith we hold many truths about God, which the philosophers were unable to discover by natural reason” (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, art. 8)

The Enlightenment: The term used by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and then by others to describe man’s coming of age from the state of infancy. ... The Enlightenment became a movement that has since affected much of the Western world.” (Fr. John Hardon’s *Modern Catholic Dictionary*)

“Our devotion must ascend to the infinite love of the Person of the Son of God, yet we need to keep in mind that his divine love is inseparable from his human love.” – Dilxit nos, ¶160

When Pope Francis says that the divine love of Jesus is inseparable from His human love, he reminds us that there is an unbreakable bond between the supernatural and the natural. Although the supernatural and the natural are distinct, they are not divorced from one another. If we wish to know what love is in this world, we should turn to the life of Christ and the near perfect imitations of His life as seen in the saints and martyrs. What does Jesus have to do with metaphysics? Well, being that metaphysics simply means “beyond physics” or going “beyond the physical,” Jesus is a physical embodiment and manifestation of the goodness that is beyond. Jesus, as a perfect reflection of the Father, who is fully God and fully man, reveals to us – in a sensible way – the supernatural reality of life. And this supernatural reality of life is made known to us today through the physical and sensible sacraments and through the signs and symbols of the Church.

As a movement, the Enlightenment deemphasized the necessity of divine law. Though emphasizing philosophy and reason is good, this movement did not submit itself to the queen of the sciences, which is theology. Catholicism stands in the middle of the two extremes of rationalism and fideism. Rationalism is the idea that all knowledge – even knowledge about the mysteries of Christ and the nature of God – can be derived from reason. John Locke, one of the key figures of the Enlightenment, puts it like this:

“Whether it be a divine revelation, or no, reason must judge. ... Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything” (*The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon II*, 889).

Locke’s rationalism here makes theology unnecessary. Reason alone is incapable of judging divine revelation because divine revelation requires faith. So great of an error is this, and so

great of an impact has this had on the Western world, that Pope St. John Paul II published an encyclical where he goes into great depth addressing this specific issue:

“Against all forms of rationalism, then, there was a need to affirm the distinction between the mysteries of faith and the findings of philosophy, and the transcendence and precedence of the mysteries of faith over the findings of philosophy” (*Fides et Ratio*, ¶53).

Also highlighting the flaws of the other extreme of fideism, Pope John Paul II points out that it “fails to recognize the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith” (*ibid.*, ¶55). Catholicism teaches that just because faith and theology are superior to reason and philosophy, they are not at odds. Faith elevates everything we know by reason and gives us a truly enlightened understanding of the world.

Without the direction of faith, we are lost. Natural reason can only take us so far. The Enlightenment, as a movement, gives reason more authority than it has. Another key figure of the Enlightenment was Immanuel Kant, who once wrote, “‘Have courage to use your own understanding!’ – that is the motto of enlightenment.” To use your own understanding, according to Kant, meant to understand things “without guidance from another” (*An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* pg. 1). It is certainly good to think for oneself, to not blindly obey directives without first judging the rightness or wrongness of the command. This is especially important today when the most powerful institutions in the world have proven themselves to be tyrannical. But if thinking for oneself means that we do not allow Christ’s Church and Divine Revelation to guide us, then we will surely be falling into the sin of pride and presumption. On this point, Pope John Paul II goes directly at the Enlightenment and says ...

“All this, the entire drama of salvation history, had disappeared as far as the Enlightenment was concerned. Man remained alone: alone as creator of his own history and his own civilization; alone as one who decides what is good and what is bad” (*Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium*, 2005).

The Enlightenment tends towards subjectivism, the unfortunately popular belief that truth is not universal. It also tends towards individualism, which ignores the social and communal reality of the human person. God did not leave us alone, but rather, He tells us, “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Jesus did not leave us alone. He gave us a Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, which brings us into communion with the living God and directs our lives.