

Words of Wisdom—
A Philosophical Dictionary Inspired by *Fides et ratio*

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In *Fides et ratio* (1998), John Paul II called on philosophers who would have their efforts meet the demands of the “word of God” (i.e., Christian revelation) to pursue forms of thought that are truly “sapiential”—by contrast, e.g., with the generally historicist, scientific, and/or nihilist trends of the day. While the Pope recognized that this task may appear “daunting,” he noted that today’s philosophers are not without resources: we can and should undertake our efforts “in organic continuity with the great tradition which, beginning with the ancients, passes through the Fathers of the Church and the masters of Scholasticism and includes the fundamental achievements of modern and contemporary thought” (#85).

In this presentation I introduce a philosophical dictionary inspired by the call of *Fides et ratio*. Titled *Words of Wisdom*, its distinctiveness lies precisely in its being ordered to a contemporary renewal of what John Paul termed the “great tradition”—a classical tradition of Christian reflection, ever ancient and ever new, in which philosophy plays an integral role. If a dictionary is to serve a renewal that is of this tradition, it must contain essential terms, together with their uses, of key figures alluded to in the above quotation (in particular, but not exclusively, St. Thomas Aquinas and his school). If it is to serve a renewal that is contemporary, it must include references to salient features—both complementary and competing—of today’s intellectual culture.

Currently in print are at least a dozen books that their publishers call “philosophical dictionaries.” Some of these might rather be characterized as one-volume encyclopedias, since they focus on philosophical topics and figures, rather than on terms and meanings as such. Regarding the others, a search of their entries for terms of significance to the tradition—e.g., act, being, conscience, end, intellect, moral precept, nature, perfection, subsistence, transcendental, voluntary, and wisdom—reveals that, in spite of containing much useful information, these dictionaries lack essential resources for a new generation of students of the “perennial,” or, as John Paul II also called it (*Fides et ratio*, #106), “enduringly valid” philosophy.

As far as the present author can determine, the last effort to produce a comprehensive dictionary of the present sort was undertaken a half-century ago by Bernard Wuellner, S.J., in his *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* (Bruce, 1956). Only a few used copies of this volume are to be found; however, beyond consideration of that book’s scarcity, the present circumstances of intellectual culture—as well as developments within the “great tradition” itself—make a new effort seem eminently worthwhile.

This presentation, in addition to reviewing the above points, will offer samples of the more than 1200 entries that have been developed, to give attendees a flavor of the new dictionary—its contents, its style, and its system of cross-referencing—and, just as importantly for the author, to solicit attendees’ comments.