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An Expanded Reason university course for professors: A case study for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary dialogue between reason and faith

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ABSTRACT

The Catholic identity and inspiration of the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria is manifested, among other ways, in the application of what Pope Benedict XVI called 'Expanded Reason'. The Expanded Reason Institute is working to equip UFV professors with the ability to incorporate a broader approach to their scientific disciplines, with a deeper and more open vision of the totality of reality. In this paper, we present the results of one of the Institute's most recent initiatives: a training course designed to help full-time professors overcome the fragmentation of the sciences, seek the *unity of knowledge*, raise fundamental questions, recognise the limits of their particular field of science and engage in an enriching dialogue with philosophy and theology.

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1. An Expanded Reason university course for professors

In this paper, we present and analyse the results of a training course for professors that aims to train them to approach their teaching and research from an Expanded Reason approach, so that they can generate a transformative teaching and a more humane science. The methodology followed in the realization of this case study consisted of three steps: conceptual and strategic description of the project, explanation of the practical development of the courses and the modalities of interaction with the professors, feedback from the participants in the courses in different editions and the impact of the course contents on their own academic work. Since the number of participants was small, it seemed appropriate to reduce the working hypothesis to the usefulness of the course and the subsequent impact. For this reason, the feedback questionnaire was very brief and contained very basic questions, aimed at getting the professors involved and highlighting the relationship of the course contents with their academic research and teaching activity.

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2. Context: towards an Expanded Reason university

The Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (UVF) has always questioned what it means to be a university and what it means to be a university of Catholic inspiration (UFV 2016, 2018). More specifically, we question what it means for ourselves, in our context and circumstances, to be a university of Catholic inspiration. Looking at other Catholic universities around the world, the answer to this question is clearly far from unanimous: some focus on pastoral care and social commitment while others emphasise the importance of a humanistic and transversal education. These are important and fruitful areas but, in our judgment, these do not reach the heart of the question. What then is the challenge and mission that, in our view, identifies our idea of a university? We believe in the complementary relationship and essential dialogue between reason and faith.

We believe a Catholic university is one where its teaching and research are dedicated to ‘widening the horizons of rationality’ (Pope Benedict XVI 2008) or ‘to broaden the scope of reason’ (Pope Francis 2017, n° 2) This may be considered the Catholic way of reason, encompassing the entire person, their faith and life (Aranguren 2020, 9). At a Catholic university, we cannot merely leave our faith and philosophical or existential reflections at the door of our research laboratories or libraries, as if these were external or foreign to rational knowledge and enquiry. The realities of the world and the realities of faith find their origin in the same God. Thus, there can be no contradiction between them (Pope John Paul II, 1990, n° 17). Rather, each illuminates the other in the search for truth.

This is very easy to say and very difficult to put into practice. We are well aware that humanity has lost faith in its capacity to know the truth, resigned to seeking only empirical knowledge, enclosed within its own limits and conditioning (Benedict XVI 2006, 2007; Bonjour 1978; Dingle 1941; Lund 2022; MacIntyre 2009; Newman 1858). This has led to pervasive scientism in some areas of knowledge and scepticism in others. Both one and the other are satisfied with merely partial truths, forgoing a radical questioning of the foundations and meaning of life, human history and the world around us, or suppressing these questions before they take form. It is precisely in opposition to this fragmentation of knowledge, and the denial of our capacity to know the truth, that we seek an expanded reason and a broader vision of reality. The concept of reason must be ‘widened’ to encompass and explore aspects of reality which go beyond the merely empirical, not satisfied with partial, dispersed and fragmentary truths to explore the decisive questions of life. By accepting mere positivist reason as the only truth, the human being is diminished, and his humanity is threatened (Pope Benedict XVI 2011).

This situation is noted by numerous universities, in their founding or mission documents (Montes Quiroz et al. 2021; Pérez Olivares et al. 2012), and authors (Giménez Amaya 2020; Lewis 2007; MacIntyre 2009). All of them point out the difficulties that the university encounters in its search for truth due to specialization, limitations in the training of university professors or the influence of contemporary culture on their vision of the truth, the good or its way of conceiving reason.

2.1. What is an Expanded Reason approach?

An Expanded Reason approach, as we understand it at the UFV, consists in overcoming the fragmentary vision of reality, seeking the *unity of knowledge*, exploring fundamental, radical questions, recognising the limits of our particular science and engaging in a dialogue with philosophy and theology.

Before proceeding any further, we need to explain what we mean by *unity of knowledge*. As Tanzella-Nitti clearly explains (2022), this question can be addressed on two different conceptual levels. First, it refers to the integration between scientific and philosophical rationality. Second, it refers to the integration between natural reason and religious faith. Habitually, every professor specialises in their area of science, which is correct and proper, leading to the advancement of human knowledge. However, this may lead us to become enclosed within the limits of our individual and fragmentary disciplines, without reference to the whole, resulting in a distorted, incomplete, and often erroneous understanding of reality (Lacalle 2018, 18–20). Thus, it is necessary to lift our gaze and recognise the place our discipline occupies within a larger reality, admitting the limits of our particular science and engaging with other areas of knowledge for a holistic vision (Prigogine and Stengers 2004; Capelle-Dumont 2021). The search for the *unity of knowledge* can only be fruitful by overcoming our self-imposed limitations, thinking that we can only know what we perceive through our senses or limiting ourselves to working on what appears to be immediately useful. It can only be achieved through the dialogue between positive science and philosophy, and, of course, allowing our faith to illuminate our academic work as well as our whole life. This broader vision should lead each researcher and professor to consider, from their own discipline, the relevance of questions such as the nature of the human person as expressed in their discipline, as well as problems concerning truth, good and evil, or the meaning of their speciality in culture and society, as well as in human life and in the search for the common good. These questions are not the province of the irrational as scientism would have us believe (Pope John Paul II, 1998, 88; Pope Benedict XVI 2006, 12) but rather they reveal the limits of our particular science and the need for philosophy and theology to afford us answers. On the contrary, when God is put apart from science we ‘soon break up into fragments the whole circle of secular knowledge’ (Newman 1858).

2.2. What results are we seeking?

In no way do we seek a mere non-integrated accumulation of knowledge resulting from the juxtaposition of philosophical or theological concepts with scientific concepts. Nor should, for example, professors of mathematics or genetics begin explaining metaphysics and theology in their classes. Instead, professors should refer to the fundamental questions of truth, goodness and the ‘why’ of things. The aim is to reconsider every course, overcoming the limits of each area of knowledge, expanding horizons and searching for a much deeper understanding (Lacalle 2018, 23), thus providing a transformative education to our students, enabling them to acquire not only solid competences and knowledge but also the capacity to think critically, to ask fundamental questions, to seek the truth and commit to the good.

Additionally, we aspire to create a more human science, oriented towards the fulfilment of individuals and the common good. Through an Expanded Reason approach, we can offer the scientific community fresh perspectives and new questions which illuminate the path towards a fuller understanding, new solutions and creative ideas in the fields of culture, politics and industry.

The Universidad Francisco de Vitoria has undergone an intense journey in the clarification and research of Expanded Reason, as part of our own mission as a university (UFV 2021). In addition to the Expanded Reason Awards and a growing number of publications and research in this area, one of the fruits of this journey is the course whose results we present in this work. We have adopted various measures to help broaden the horizons of rationality in the teaching and research staff, including the promotion and orientation of doctoral thesis, as far as possible, towards expanded reasoning approaches; candidates for tenured or tenure-track professorships must present and defend a teaching and research project based on expanded reason; in the internal calls for research and innovation projects, expanded reason projects are favoured. With these and other measures, we are helping our professors and researchers to gradually generate the habit of looking at reality with a perspective of expanded reason.

2.3. The Expanded Reason Institute

At the start of 2015, the Expanded Reason Institute was founded at the UFV, aiming to lead the way in facilitating a broader understanding of the horizons of reason. The Institute pursues this work in several different areas, both within the university and beyond.

Ad extra, the Institute has founded the Expanded Reason Awards, organised in cooperation with the Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI Vatican Foundation. These Awards aim to recognise the work of professors and researchers throughout the world who are akin to our Expanded Reason sensibilities. There is also the Expanded Reason Congress, held biannually since 2018, seeking to be a place of encounter for internationally recognised specialists engaging in a dialogue between their particular fields of positive science and philosophy or theology.

Ad intra, the Institute is focussed on professors, since there can be no Expanded Reason university without Expanded Reason professors. The work with professors is complex; the majority are educated in a tradition of positivism which can hinder an openness to wider reason, while all of us live immersed in a culture of pervasive scientism which accepts no truths other than those reached through positive science. After several years of dispersed actions, involving a great deal of effort with limited results, we concluded that three elements are essential in helping professors to expand the scope and reach of reason:

- Philosophical enlightenment: first, it is necessary that professors in particular scientific fields receive training in engaging with fundamental questions (to be discussed below).
- Workshops: some journeys are difficult to make alone, and one founded on Expanded Reason no less so. Communities of professors are the ideal forum for

an Expanded Reason dialogue: a place to share advances, difficulties and best practices, to formulate and respond to essential questions, and to continue advancing together.

- Personal accompaniment: in addition to philosophical enlightenment and the enrichment provided by the community, personal accompaniment is also important. Individual guidance serves to help professors identify and engage with the essential questions within their discipline and apply these to their teaching and research practices.

Evidently, an Expanded Reason university cannot be formed by means of a single institute; the entire institution must be involved, orienting virtually all university activities towards this goal: faculty recruitment, the academic program design, establishing priority lines of research, life on campus, etc.

3. The Expanded Reason course

As mentioned, this paper will focus on just one of the many initiatives promoted by the Expanded Reason Institute: the university professors training course implemented in 2020/21 designed to facilitate and consolidate their understanding of an Expanded Reason vision, its importance for the university mission and how a broader vision of reason can transform their teaching and research in service to society.

The course integrates the three elements just mentioned: it contains philosophical and theological training; it includes guided meetings for the teaching community in which a fruitful dialogue takes place; and it also includes individual tutorials.

3.1. Structure of the course

The course consists of an introductory module, four modules focussed on fundamental questions (to be discussed below) and a final module where professors describe the changes in the orientation of attitudes of their teaching and research practices:

Module 1: Introduction. Towards an Expanded Reason university.

Module 2: The anthropological question: the person.

Module 3: The epistemological question: the truth.

Module 4: The ethical question: goodness.

Module 5: The question of meaning.

Module 6: Incorporation and impact on teaching and research practices.

Each of the modules on fundamental questions has a particular internal structure, based on the key aspects of our pedagogical model (UFV 2020):

- Awakening: the aim is to show that the response to fundamental questions is never obvious within our current time, be it in academic disciplines or life in general. To produce this awakening the course offers videos and texts that reveal

the confusion within our culture and the many different responses regarding the human experience, the truth, goodness and meaning available to us.

- **Discovering:** once the need for a response to fundamental questions has been awakened, the aim is to invite the professor to reflect and consider their personal vision of the person, goodness, the truth and the meaning that underlies their particular discipline. We know there is no neutrality, that everyone has a vision, implicit or explicit, of the human being, the truth, goodness, and the meaning of life. What is important is that all professors consider these questions. To do so they must first assimilate certain philosophical and theological ideas in order to formulate the fundamental questions and respond to them, and thus discover the vision of the individual, the truth, goodness or meaning that is particular to their scientific community and that is embedded and transmitted through their own teaching and how this influences their teaching and research practices.
- **Deciding:** every professor must find their own response to each of these fundamental questions, leading them to *rethink* their teaching and research practices, generally leading to a deeper awareness and openness to reality.

3.2. Course content

The course initially presents the vision of the university which guides and inspires our work. It then addresses the fundamental questions professors must consider in order to expand their horizons of rationality. These questions lie at the heart of any scientific endeavour and are connected to the existential questions of humanity. Ultimately, science is the response to the wonder of reality, and the confluence between these human questions and scientific enquiry. We will work primarily with four fundamental questions (Lacalle 2018, 28–37; Aranguren 2020):

- **The anthropological question.** Within every discipline, there is an explicit or implicit anthropology, a vision of humanity which determines its content and studies. Each professor must consider: what is the idea of the person underlying my subject; individualist or in solidarity; materialist or open to transcendence; genetically predetermined or capable of freedom? What type of human person is formed with the knowledge I am transmitting?
- **The epistemological question.** Referring to the question of truth and the possibility of knowing the truth, this question leads us to ask: is what I teach or research completely true? What limits do my science and my method have? What are the questions which lead to the frontiers of my science beyond which it cannot find answers?
- **The ethical question.** The question about the human person and the truth leads inevitably to the question of how to act, both within the framework of scientific enquiry, in its technological applications and in one's own life. Is what I teach or research good or bad, does it dignify or debase my students and me? Does it contribute to a more just and humanist world?
- **The question of meaning** leads us to the essential: Is what I learn or teach worthwhile? How is it related to what is important in life? Why do I do it? For

what does it serve? There are different levels of meaning and our intention is for both professors and students to consider fundamental questions on a path from the most near and immediate to the ultimate meaning of life and creation; that is, considering the answers on all levels. Does God have to say anything relevant to man about himself or about science? (López Moratalla 2006).

After the path travelled in the first five modules, the sixth invites the professors to transform their teaching and research in line with their broadened horizon of reason. To facilitate this task, professors are offered numerous examples from diverse fields of knowledge in which colleagues from the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria and other universities show how an Expanded Reason approach led them to renew their teaching and/or their research practices.

3.3. Format and development of the course

The course has a hybrid format which combines online content and resources with presential, in community meetings.

The content of each module—texts and videos—includes materials created specifically for the course, along with other resources by different authors. There are two levels to the course: a first level with compulsory materials and content, and a second offered to those wishing to explore further any specific aspects or questions.

Each module includes several compulsory tasks which are evaluated by the Expanded Reason Institute team, offering individual feedback to each professor to facilitate understanding and assimilation of philosophical and theological concepts and how these relate to their own scientific discipline.

After a period of individual reflection, fortnightly community meetings are held. These communities are made up of professors from each degree together with philosophers: they each better understand the Expanded Reason approach and how it applies to their own discipline. Learning in community has proven to be the most important aspect of the course, as it is here where members of the same degree cooperating in related scientific disciplines can share their understanding, doubts and teaching strategies to enrich their specific area through an Expanded Reason approach.

Finally, an event is held in which each community offers a presentation or illustrative poster of their journey during the course, their progress and their understanding of the importance of the Expanded Reason approach to their degree program and scientific discipline.

3.4. Results

After a previous pilot course to collect opinions and feedback from participants to improve the course design, content, etc., three editions of the course have now been conducted. A total of 39 professors from different degrees and disciplines participated in the pilot program, with their comments and suggestions contributing to the course improvement.

A total of 354 professors participated in the **first edition** of the course (2021–2022 academic year), of whom 287 satisfactorily finished it (81%). Among those who

completed the entire course, some 68.3% did so in July 2022 and a further 31.7% did so in September 2022. Some 12% of participants abandoned the course before completion, the most common reason being an excessive workload.

An anonymous survey was conducted at the start of the course regarding the participants' initial expectations. The results of these surveys are of great interest. First, the professors enrolled in the course were highly motivated. On a scale from 1 to 9, some 36% rated their motivation as 9, and 22% at 8, while only 5% reported a motivation level below 4.5, that is, they considered themselves demotivated. Nevertheless, the survey showed that the majority of professors found it difficult to follow the course due to the additional workload it involved, an estimated 350 hours (equivalent to 14 credits). In fact, 52% of participants had initial reservations about the course because of time constraints and availability while only 10% felt they would have sufficient availability to take the course.

A survey of participant satisfaction upon course completion revealed the following results:

- Some 90% of participants, regardless of their final evaluation, felt they had understood the purpose of the Expanded Reason approach. On a scale of 1 to 9, some 25% responded with a 7, 41% with an 8 and 24% with a 9.
- 97% believed the proposal of developing an Expanded Reason approach to be important or very important for the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, with 5% responding with a 7, 22% with an 8 and 70% with a 9.
- 73% of participants reported being committed or highly committed to the Expanded Reason vision. On a scale of 1 to 9, 35% responded with a 7, 26% with an 8 and 12% with a 9.
- 79% reported being satisfied or highly satisfied with the course. On a scale of 1 to 9, 25% responded with a 7, 27% with an 8 and 27% with a 9. Only 6% of participants rated their satisfaction with the course below 5.

The professors enrolled in the course performed several tasks for each of the modules, which were evaluated by the team of the Expanded Reason Institute, who offered constructive feedback. Some 21% of the tasks were considered excellent, 60% were rated satisfactory and 19% as unsatisfactory. Beyond these evaluations, it is interesting to note that the evaluation process itself led to very profound academic discussions and dialogue.

For the **second edition** (2022–2023 academic year) certain changes were made based on the comments and reported experiences and in line with international quality standards for online courses. Specifically, certain texts which professors found especially difficult were changed and/or simplified when reiterative. The 'awakening' aspect was reinforced to include resources which more clearly illustrated the difficulties and importance of considering and addressing fundamental questions.

A total of 102 professors participated in the second edition, grouped into 6 communities in addition to the 20 communities which continued working after completing the previous edition of the course. These professors, in addition to accompaniment by professors of humanities, conducted a series of workshops and

individual tutorials aimed to help design methodologies favouring the consideration of the fundamental questions raised by Expanded Reason and other discoveries from the course.

There was a significant decrease in the number of professors who completed the course: 34.3% in June and 12% in September. This may have been due to two causes: first, many of these professors were unable to take the first edition of the course because of workload, time restrictions or other reasons and these circumstances did not change; second, some participants were newly incorporated professors who were entirely unfamiliar with the Expanded Reason approach.

This situation was revealed in the survey of initial expectations which showed that only 2% believed it was a convenient moment for the course while 39% reported it was an inconvenient moment. Despite these initial impressions, the final satisfaction survey produced the following results:

- 100% of participants reported understanding the purpose of the Expanded Reason approach. On a scale of 1 to 9, some 13% responded with a 7, 56% with an 8 and 31% with a 9.
- 85% believed the Expanded Reason approach to be important or very important for their subject, with 35% responding with a 7, 35% with an 8 and 15% with a 9.
- 100% believed the proposal of developing an Expanded Reason approach to be very important for the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, with 12% responding with an 8 and 88% with a 9.
- 76% of participants reported being committed or very committed to the course. On a scale of 1 to 9, 38% responded with a 7, 38% with an 8 and 13% with a 9.
- 94% reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the course. 35% responded with a 7, 25% with an 8 and 31% with a 9.

Both editions offered an open space for professors to express their impressions about the course. Among the positive evaluations, various professors highlighted the audio-visual content, the selection of course themes and the overall quality of the materials used in the course. Most negative impressions and comments referred to the workload and difficulty of certain texts.

The **third edition** of the course has just commenced, with a total of 36 professors from the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria enrolled. The number of participants is lower because most full-time professors have already taken the course. In this edition, newly incorporated professors are enrolled along with those who were unable to complete an earlier course or whose results were unsatisfactory in previous editions.

3.5. Impact

As has been explained, in each module the professors have to answer some questions related to their own university work, and in module 6 they have to present and explain some evidence of how the course has impacted their teaching or research. We can affirm that the immediate impact of the course on the teaching or research of the professors is scarce since only 20% of the participants present something truly new and profound at the end of the course. However, the fruits of the course become

apparent sometime later as professors generally need further support to put into practice the intuitions that the course has awakened in them.

Over time, we are gathering real examples of how the expanded reason course has an impact on the university faculty and, eventually, on teaching and research. Its impact on student learning remains to be assessed.

3.6. Increasing participation of professors from other universities

As the number of UFV professors enrolled in the course diminishes, given that almost all full-time professors have taken the course, the number of professors from other universities is increasing due to the growing interest in the course within the *Regnum Christi* International Network of universities, of which the UFV is a part.

In the first edition of the course, 5 professors from the Universidad Anáhuac de Xalapa (Mexico) participated. In the second, a total of 87 professors from various Anáhuac universities in Mexico participated as well as from *Finis Terrae de Chile*. Furthermore, in July 2023, a presential summer course was offered at the UFV campus attended by 22 university administrators from the network, with the intention of furthering the implementation and experience of an Expanded Reason approach in their universities.

In the third edition, participants include 103 professors from 7 universities in Mexico and Chile: Anáhuac Querétaro, Anáhuac Cancún, Anáhuac Puebla, Anáhuac Veracruz, Anáhuac Mayab, *Finis Terrae de Chile* and Anáhuac Online.

4. Conclusions and prospectives

The course provided by the Expanded Reason Institute of the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria has proven to be an effective tool in the training of professors, helping to broaden the horizons of rationality in all disciplines. Evidently, this is just a first step on this path, but it has been a significant one.

Most professors who have taken the course have demonstrated their understanding of the proposal of an Expanded Reason approach and have been able to introduce changes in their subjects and their research. Currently, a great number of UFV professors are undertaking an ambitious action plan to renew and refresh the learning experience of our students, facilitating their openness to an expanded reason approach.

There are, however, a small number of professors who have shown no interest in understanding the proposal of an Extended Reason approach to teaching and research. This may be because they have difficulties in opening up to a vision different from the one they have known in the tradition of their disciplines, or because we have not been able to find a language, methodology or resources that would help them sufficiently. We will not cease to strive to find brighter paths to help everyone understand how expanded reason helps to broaden the horizons of rationality, as well as being the very reason for university life.

The team at the Expanded Reason Institute is working on one hand, to develop an abbreviated course aimed at part-time professors and, on the other, to improve the course by incorporating the suggestions and input received in earlier editions. We

also intend to offer the course not only to universities in our *Regnum Christi* network but also to any professor with an interest in expanding the horizons of reason in order to offer students a truly transformative education and pursue a more humanist form of scientific enquiry.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

María Lacalle Noriega holds a law degree and a doctorate in law from the Universidad Pontificia de Comillas (Madrid). She also holds a degree in religious sciences from the same university, and a masters in theology from the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria. She is Professor of Philosophy of Law and of Biolaw at the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria. She is currently Vice rector for Faculty and Education at the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria. She is also the director of the Expanded Reason Institute, whose aim is to promote dialogue between the different sciences and philosophy and theology, and of the Centre for Family Studies. Her research and publications focus mainly on issues related to the family, life and human rights and university teaching.

Marcelo López Cambrero was born in Albacete in 1973 and studied in Valencia, first in Law and Business Administration and Management and then Philosophy. He received his PhD in Philosophy with a thesis on the thought of Nikolai A. Berdiaev, who is considered the main disciple of Dostoevsky. He has been a professor at the International Academy of Philosophy (Liechtenstein) and at the Edith Stein Institute of Philosophy (Granada). Currently he is a professor of Anthropology and the director of the Humanities Department at the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria. His research and publications focus mainly on the problems of the contemporary world, especially on the social, political and economic changes that are transforming our societies.

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