

## INTERVIEW WITH MAX BONILLA, DIRECTOR OF THE EXPANDED REASON INSTITUTE AT UFV IN SPAIN

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon*

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### EXCERPTS:

- “The Expanded Reason Awards seek to humanize the sciences by returning to a deeper understanding of the purpose of science, technology and professional work through a dialogue with philosophy and/or theology; to understand the sciences as human efforts at the service of society and the common good.”
- “It is important to create a network where younger and beginning scholars can interact with experienced academics so that together they can develop new avenues to solve human problems and contribute more effective solutions to a society that badly needs them.”

**You are the International Director of the Expanded Reason Institute at the University Francisco de Vitoria in Spain. Could you please explain what the Institute does?**

The Expanded Reason Institute was born out of an interest in the dialogue between the particular sciences and the humanities, and, in particular, an initiative along those lines jointly run by the Vatican Foundation Joseph Ratzinger and the University Francisco de Vitoria in Madrid, the Expanded Reason Awards. The institute carries out university initiatives that promote the dialogue between faith and reason in various fields of knowledge.

The main interest is to engage academic fields with a proper understanding of the human person and the quest for truth, since universities, when properly understood, are not just entities meant to offer professional credentials, but are communities of people dedicated to seeking the truth in the many aspects of human reality. The Expanded Reason Institute promotes initiatives that engage deeper questions about the human person and the nature of reality so as to foster a more authentic human community, through a better understanding of the human person, the truth, ethics and ultimately that which gives us meaning.

#### Box 1: Interview Series

**What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website?** The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

**Why a series of interviews?** Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

**What is the focus of this interview?** In this interview, Max Bonilla, International Director of the Expanded Reason Institute at the University Francisco de Vitoria in Spain, explains the origins and aims of the Expanded Reason Institute and its annual Awards.

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**Why were the Expanded Reason Awards created? What is their objective?**

The Expanded Reason Awards were created as a response to the encouragement of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI to "broaden the horizon of reason." The Vatican Foundation Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI wished to increase projects that promote the vision of the Pope and thus asked us to work with them. Since the Foundation already offered the famous Ratzinger Prize, we thought that a complementary prize offered to scientists and experts in secular fields who engage the questions that were important to Pope Benedict (and now to Pope Francis) would be a suitable way to contribute to that important work of the Vatican Foundation. So the Expanded Reason Awards program offers 100,000 euros a year in four prizes to professors from around the world (25,000 euros each) who engage their field of knowledge with deeper questions of philosophy and theology.

Pope Benedict encouraged academics to not remain locked in the positivist mentality so common today or to assume that only an empiricist mentality can unlock the truth. In other words, Pope Benedict encouraged professors and researchers to ask deeper questions so as to unlock greater truths. The Expanded Reason Awards rewards and incentivizes this kind of work. The challenge of Pope Benedict that the awards propose is for anyone that seeks the truth without bias. This is a search that, as *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* argues about university work, is "a search that is neither subordinated to nor conditioned by particular interests of any kind." (*Ex Corde*, 7). And Pope Francis insists that all the work we do should put the person's dignity front and center, especially the neediest among us. Thus the Expanded Reason Awards is a project that seeks to humanize the sciences by returning to a deeper understanding of the purpose of science, technology and professional work through a dialogue with philosophy and/or theology; that is, to understand the sciences as human efforts at the service of society and the common good.

**What is the role of the Vatican Foundation Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI in the awards?**

The Vatican Foundation Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI jointly sponsors the Expanded Reason Awards with the University Francisco de Vitoria in Madrid. The president of the Foundation, currently Fr. Federico Lombardi, SJ, functions as co-chair of the international jury that decides the winners along with the rector of the University Francisco de Vitoria, Daniel Sada. Because the Expanded Reason Awards is an initiative of the Vatican Foundation, the award ceremony takes place most often at the Vatican followed by an audience with the current Holy Father, Pope Francis.

**Who can apply for the awards, what do they need to do, and what are the deadlines for the current cycle?**

Anyone who is doing university level research or teaching can apply for the awards. As an international awards program, applicants are welcomed from any country in the world. Applications are received in two general categories, teaching and research. 100,000 euros are awarded each year to four professors (25,000 euros each) who do either great teaching projects or outstanding research in a way that engages deeper questions about human reality, as explained on our website, [www.expandedreason.org](http://www.expandedreason.org).

The application process is simple. A candidate would visit our website and fill out the application form, submitting three documents: the primary document which is a book or an article in research, or a teaching project; a CV showing the candidate's academic career; and an explanatory document where the book or article or teaching project is explained in light of the Expanded Reason Awards. So the explanatory document shows how the primary document meets the criteria of the awards. The criteria can be found in a conditions document found on our website. We began the awards receiving applicants in two languages, and are gradually increasing the languages we accept. We are currently receiving applications in any of four languages: English, French, Italian, and Spanish.

The award cycle repeats every year: The awards open in October, the deadline is in April, the winners are announced in July and the award ceremony takes place usually at the Vatican in September. This year, the deadline is April 12, 2021 at midnight in Vatican City (or Central European Time).

**There seems to be quite a bit of diversity in past award recipients. Could you give a few examples of their work?**

The work of winners is varied precisely because the encouragement we offer is for scholars in nearly any field of knowledge. Thus we have had scientists that study quantum physics and philosophy, theologians that seek to understand environmental questions, economists that promote a more just society, philosophers that make a contribution to cancer research, management professors that reframe the purpose of doing business, and many others. Added to the winners are hundreds of participants from around the world and from many more fields of knowledge that are helping us create a network of scholars that is interested in engaging deeper questions related to the relationship between any particular science and philosophy/theology. The jury invites not only established scholars from any field of knowledge, but also younger academics.

**It is of course a great honor for recipients to be recognized by the awards, but how do you aim to achieve a broader impact?**

Our goal is to create a network of scholars who understand the need for a broader engagement with their fields of knowledge and who are willing to ask deeper philosophical questions, not only narrow scientific ones. To achieve a broader impact, it is important to create a network where younger and beginning scholars can interact with experienced academics so that together they can develop new avenues to solve human problems and contribute more effective solutions to a society that badly needs them.

Part of this effort requires me to travel to various places where I can explain and encourage professors to participate in our network. In practice this means that sometimes I am invited to visit a particular city in a country that I happen to plan to visit and work with an interested university to organize meetings or seminars related to the Expanded Reason projects. These can take the form of simpler meetings where I explain the awards to groups of professors, or more complex seminars or conferences where multiple speakers and scholars engage questions from an expanded reason perspective. It all depends on the interest and needs of the host university. For a university this is helpful because they

often have the need to promote excellence in research and teaching from among the professoriate, and our awards are a great avenue to do that at no cost to those universities. Universities that are interested in a visit would contact me and ask me if I happen to visit their country or city in the next few months. If that is the case, together we can plan the type of activity they would find most helpful to them.

We also have a series of other projects that increase our impact. The Templeton World Charity Foundation has generously funded several of them. For one of them which we are launching soon, we hope to engage interested universities from around the world in an online teaching project. I cannot give details about this yet, but universities that might be interested can contact me for more details either by email or through our website.

Finally, we also have a series of publications in our Expanded Reason Collection by our publishing house, Editorial UFV, that offer some of the writings from our winners and selected authors. These is a growing collection of publications distributed around the world for the benefit of anyone seeking to understand and see examples of what we mean by an expanded reason approach. Some of these publications are offered free in digital form, and the number of authors being published increases constantly.





**What is your own trajectory? How did you come to be responsible for the Institute?**

For over twenty years I have worked in Catholic education, first in the US, and now in Europe. When the Expanded Reason Awards were first proposed, I was asked to help organize and run them. Now we are also expanding the initiatives of the Expanded Reason Institute with more projects, all aimed at promoting the approach to university education and research that I described above.

**Could you tell us a bit more about yourself, your passions or particular interests?**

Since the days I was a college student back in the 1980s and 1990s, I was concerned about the nature of Catholic university education and the importance to promote it in healthy ways that respect academic freedom and that promote and nurture communities that seek the truth in mutual respect. At that time, the publication of *Ex Corde*

*Ecclesiae* and later of *Fides et Ratio* marked a pivotal moment in my thinking because they encouraged a serious dialogue within the university community among the various fields of knowledge with philosophy and theology. As I transitioned from professor to administrator, it was just natural to continue to promote the important work of Catholic universities around the world. From before I began my doctoral studies, a great passion of mine has been to promote solid and rigorous intellectual work that can enter into fruitful dialogue with philosophy and/or theology instead of just co-existing happily in parallel but not in dialogue, as it happens often at many universities, where a core curriculum adds to but does not engage the science or professional curriculum. But that dialogue always seemed to me to be essential for a mature and well-rounded university community, especially a Catholic university, and, at the same time, a great challenge to carry out in academically rigorous ways. The Expanded Reason initiatives seek to do exactly that.



Photo: Winners and other participants in the Expanded Reason Congress meet with Pope Francis.