

Topic 3: The Development of Revelation

God revealed himself little by little to mankind, and his revelation culminated in the incarnation. Christ established the Church, which keeps his memory alive and presents Him as the one who, having lived in this world, has risen and remains among us for ever. She carries out this mission by guarding the word of God contained in the Holy Scriptures, transmitting Tradition and teaching, enlightened by the Holy Spirit,

how to live as a Christian in every age through her Magisterium.

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1. Development of Revelation: from Abraham to Christ

Revelation begins with the creation of mankind. Scripture tells us that Adam and Eve, our first parents, had an intimate relationship with God. They were close to Him and spoke with Him, as we can see in the first scenes of the book of Genesis. This shows us that mankind was created to live in communion with God. But this familiarity was lost with sin. From then on men and women will find it very difficult to discover God in their personal life and social setting. Nevertheless, God already promised our first parents that sin

would one day be overcome by the offspring of the woman (cf. Gen 3:15). Thus Christ's redemptive work was foretold, which salvation history would lead up to.

The Bible, in these accounts of mankind's origins, does not claim to narrate historical events in detail. Rather it provides essential teachings about the human being's life and the need to ground it on a relationship with God. This teaching is expressed in images and narratives whose historical value it is difficult to make a definitive judgment about. Hence it is not surprising that the Bible juxtaposes narratives differing in detail about the same events (for example, the book of Genesis presents two different accounts of the creation of man and woman). Thus we can draw many lessons from the various biblical accounts of our origins, without having to accept

that all the events narrated happened exactly in this way.

The book of Genesis also tells us that, after the first sin, human relationships were marred by deep disorder and injustice, which God found repelling. This gave rise to the story of the flood, in which Scripture sees God's punishment for the many sins of mankind. But after the flood, God renewed his friendship with Noah and his family (who were saved from the flood because they had behaved uprightly) and through them with all creation. He renewed with Noah the relationship he had intended to have with Adam and Eve and their descendants. God knew that, although the human heart was inclined to sin, He had created the world good, and He asked men and women to grow and multiply, just as he had asked Adam and Eve. With the story of Noah, God gave mankind

a second chance to live in friendship with Him.

But the real starting point of salvation history came centuries later, with the covenant God made with Abraham. Here we already find a choice on God's part. Abraham acknowledged God as his only Lord and obeyed Him with great faith. And God destined Abraham to be *the father of a multitude of nations* (Gen 17:5). Thus God began to gather together under one head all men and women, who had been scattered by sin. Two generations later, God changed Jacob's name to Israel, and his twelve sons became the foundation of the people of Israel, in the twelve tribes of Israel.

Several centuries later, in the time of Moses, God's interaction with mankind took on a more visible and committed dimension. The God of Abraham and the patriarchs made

Israel his people, and freed them from the slavery of the Egyptians. God made a covenant with Moses and placed the people under his protection and his laws. And the people solemnly accepted that covenant and committed themselves to serve the Lord and render Him worship. In their crossing of the Red Sea and the long journey through the wilderness of Sinai, in their arrival in the Promised Land and the establishment of David's kingdom, Israel experienced again and again that God was with them. For Israel is his people, which He himself has formed from among all others and which belongs to Him as *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Ex 19:6).

In the centuries that followed, God did not let this covenant weaken. Through the prophets, He guided his people to the hope of an ultimate and definitive salvation. When the people lost their way and forgot their

commitment to the covenant, God raised up his servants with the mission of leading them back to obedience and righteousness. The prophets encouraged and strengthened the people in hope, but also warned them of the danger of a false confidence in their being chosen. For if not reciprocated, that choice could turn into judgment, into punishment by God for sin. Two events in particular point to this punishment: the fall of the Northern Kingdom (ten of the twelve tribes of Israel) in 722 B.C., and the exile of the Southern Kingdom (the other two tribes that had separated centuries earlier), together with the destruction of its capital, Jerusalem, in 587 B.C. Israel thereby lost its autonomy as a people. It lived in exile, in an occupied land. But although the Lord punished them, He did not abandon them. The book of Isaiah recounts the return of the people from the Babylonian exile to

their own land, and the re-founding of the people of Israel: a re-founding that was only partial, since many remained scattered.

Throughout God's journey with Israel, the people came to know God ever better. They learned of his faithfulness and fostered the hope that He would fulfil his promise of an ultimate and definitive salvation through a king, a descendant of David, who at the end of time would establish a new Covenant. This covenant would not be written on tablets of stone, like the old one. God himself would write it on the hearts of the faithful through the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. The day would come when all peoples would come together, attracted by the radiance of the new Jerusalem, and acknowledge the God of Israel. It would be the day of perpetual peace, with the world united under one God.

Through this whole process, God prepared his people for the definitive Revelation in Jesus Christ. He is the fulfilment of the promises of the Old Testament and brings about the foretold renewal in the fulness of time. During his life on earth, Jesus communicated new and unsuspected dimensions of God to mankind. He frequently referred to the God of the Old Testament, of the Patriarchs, prophets and kings, and his preaching bore the stamp of the language and ideas that the people of Israel had shared for centuries. But his preaching about God, while finding parallels in Old Testament texts and in the Jewish thought of his time, had a completely new accent and was therefore unmistakable and unique. Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of God foretold in the Old Testament was already very near. Indeed, it was present in his words, in his deeds and in his very Person.

2. Founding of the Church

“The Lord Jesus, after praying to the Father, calling to Himself those whom He desired, appointed twelve to be with Him, and whom He would send to preach the kingdom of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, 19). When his mission in the world was finished, Jesus wanted these disciples to continue it, to evangelise all nations. Therefore he instituted the group of apostles and made Peter their head. At the Last Supper, He introduced them to the mysteries of his Body and Blood given in sacrifice, and asked them to make this present in the future. He made them witnesses of his Resurrection and sent them the Holy Spirit to strengthen them in their mission. The Church was thus fully established as the place where people of every epoch could meet Christ and follow Him on the path leading to eternal life.

The Church always keeps the memory of Christ alive and presents Him, not as a figure of the past, but as the One who, having lived in this world at a particular time, has risen and remains among us for ever.

3. Sacred Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium

a) Sacred Scripture

Throughout the centuries, the people of Israel, under divine inspiration, put into writing the testimony of God's revelation to the patriarchs, prophets and righteous and upright people. The Church accepts and venerated these Scriptures, which were God's intended preparation for the great Revelation of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the Apostles and first disciples of Jesus also wrote down the life and work of Christ, whose earthly journey they witnessed, especially the paschal mystery of his

death and resurrection. They thus gave rise to the books of the New Testament, which complete those of the Old Testament and lead to their fulness. What the Old Testament prepared for and proclaimed in symbols and figures, the New Testament bears witness to by unfolding the truth contained in the events of Jesus' life.

The sacred books are not founded only on the human memory or testimony of what God accomplished in Israel and, above all, of what He brought about through Christ. They have a deeper foundation, for their ultimate origin is in the action of the Holy Spirit, who enlightened the human writers and sustained them with his inspiration and light. Hence the Church regards Holy Scripture not primarily as human words of great value, but as the true Word of God, and reveres the Scriptures as holy and sacred. This does not mean,

however, that God “dictated” the text to the authors of the books. Rather He made use of men who, using their own faculties and means, let God work in them and through them, and thus “they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more” (*Catechism*, 106).

In this sense, the cultural, philosophical and theological limitations of the authors, who wrote at different times and in various cultures, are also present in the sacred books. But this is not really a problem for having faith in the truth they convey, because this truth is “on the religious plane,” that is, it does not refer to a scientific vision of the world, nor to an exact and precise chronicle of human history or to an enigmatic wisdom. It refers instead to the ultimate meaning of the life of all men and women, called to communion with God as his children in Christ. This truth can be expressed

in many ways: through different literary genres, through metaphors and symbols, through stories to instruct in virtue and through relating events that have actually happened. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the genesis of the sacred books assures us that they teach “solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings” for our salvation (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 11).

b) Apostolic Tradition and “Tradition”

Before putting in writing the testimony of the life and work of Christ, the apostles and first disciples of Jesus preached what they had seen and contemplated while they were with Him. They passed on orally to the communities they were founding what they had experienced with Christ, preaching the Christian message of salvation and putting it into practice through the liturgy and

the sacraments. They later recorded all this in the writings of the New Testament. Therefore the oral transmission of the life and teachings of Jesus precedes the written transmission. And it is this oral transmission that is given expression in these writings. This oral transmission includes many aspects that the apostles learned from Jesus and is part of what is called “Apostolic Tradition.” In the words of the *Compendium of the Catechism* (no. 12): “Apostolic Tradition is the transmission of the message of Christ, brought about from the very beginnings of Christianity by means of preaching, bearing witness, institutions, worship, and inspired writings.”

Throughout the ages, the Church transmits the Apostolic Tradition in two ways: *orally*, when she preaches and carries out what she learned from Christ and what the Apostles

taught, and *in writing*, when she transmits Sacred Scripture to new generations of Christians (cf. *Catechism*, 76). The first mode (oral tradition) is simply called “Tradition.”

Tradition comes from the testimonies of the Apostles about the life and teachings of Jesus; its source is therefore the same as that of the writings of the New Testament. But the two (Tradition and Scripture) have somewhat different functions. The former, being oral and practical, is richer and more flexible, and also guarantees, in a certain sense, the authenticity of the latter. Scripture, on the other hand, being recorded in writing, sets out in a fixed and immutable way what Jesus preached and lived, formulates and determines it, and prevents the teachings from being deformed over time and subjected to the arbitrariness of changing cultures.

and mentalities. *Verba volant, scripta manent*, the Roman Emperor Titus said to the Roman Senate: “words flow away, but what is written remains.”

Thus Scripture and Tradition mutually illuminate each other. For example, the Church knows by Tradition which books have been inspired, and which therefore form part of the canon of Sacred Scripture. The books that make up the Christian Bible are always the same, those that Tradition pointed to as inspired. Other writings from the same period also spoke about Jesus, but they were never considered inspired (the apocryphal writings). And, conversely, Scripture helps to clarify and reinforces what does and does not belong to Tradition. An example is the fact that in the New Testament Jesus is seen to have fasted forty days in the desert. Thus the specific part of Tradition about the need to fast in

the season of Lent finds support and confirmation in Scripture.

c) Magisterium of the Church

The passing of time leads to material progress and changes in cultures and mentalities. New perspectives are opened up and new questions are raised which affect a Christian's way of life. The morality of issues such as sustainable ecological development or the right to have a job was not discussed in ancient times. These questions, which have an impact on the way of leading a Christian life, were simply not raised. That is why our Lord, in establishing in his Church the distinction between pastors and faithful, gave the former a grace (a charism) to discern what is suitable for the Christian life of individuals and communities, and what, in contrast, is detrimental and destructive. The task of teaching, sustained by this charism, is called

the “Magisterium.” The role of the Magisterium is one of service. It is not above Sacred Scripture or Tradition, but serves both, interpreting them correctly and faithfully setting forth their content.

The authentic interpretation of Revelation “has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone, that is, to the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome, and to the bishops in communion with him” (*Compendium*, 16). They are able to exercise this function because by episcopal ordination they receive a special help from the Holy Spirit (charism of truth), which facilitates their understanding of the content of Revelation in the exercise of their ministry. Although individual bishops can err, the Church as a whole (the unity of the Roman Pontiff, of the bishops in union with him and of the Christian faithful) cannot err in matters pertaining to

Revelation. In particular, neither can the Roman Pontiff err when he teaches publicly and solemnly (*ex cathedra*) that a certain teaching is to be considered definitive because it belongs to divine Revelation. The same is true in the case of ecumenical councils. The pastors gathered together and in union with the Holy Father do not err when they indicate that something is to be believed because it belongs to the faith of the Church. In these and other cases, the Church does not err because the Holy Spirit assists her to teach Christ's doctrine truthfully.

4. How to interpret the Bible

It could be said that the Bible contains the life and history of the world and of mankind. The collection of its books is very broad and, like life itself, contains a multiplicity of viewpoints. At times it may seem that the Bible contradicts itself or that it

advocates attitudes that cannot be true because they are not right. Controversial issues include violence, slavery, the role of women, revenge, and so on. It is therefore important to learn to understand what Scripture wishes to teach in each topic or textual unit.

The Second Vatican Council devoted a document to divine Revelation: the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*. Chapter III deals with the principles and criteria to be taken into account in order to interpret the Bible correctly. Let us look at them:

- a) In the first place, the Council stresses that God is the Author of Sacred Scripture; but, as we said, in it He speaks to us through human beings and in a human way. Therefore a correct interpretation of Sacred Scripture requires a careful investigation of what the human authors really wanted to affirm and

what God wanted to make known through human words.

b) Secondly, since it is a book inspired by God, Scripture must be interpreted “with the help of the same Spirit through which it was written” (*Dei Verbum*, 12). That is, a personal openness to God and a request for help are required on the part of the interpreter in order to understand Scripture correctly. Without such openness it is easy for prejudices or personal ideas and interests to cloud the interpretation.

c) Thirdly, great attention needs to be paid to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture: only when it is understood in its unity is it truly Scripture. This principle is also important because not everything that Scripture says has the same value or force; not everything expresses the word of God equally. A hierarchy of truths and concepts

exists within Scripture. Knowing this helps us to interpret the true meaning of passages that may surprise the reader. We need to always keep in mind that Christ is the centre and heart of Scripture.

d) Fourthly, Scripture must be interpreted in the context of the living Tradition of the Church, for it is simply the written expression of that same Revelation of which Tradition is the oral expression. Along with Tradition, attention must also be paid to the whole of the Church's faith, which is expressed in her Magisterium, in the harmony of her truths, in the unity of her doctrine. For example, if the interpretation of a certain biblical passage seems to contradict a defined truth of faith, that interpretation can hardly be true.

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