

1. THE COUNCIL AND THE SOURCES OF REVELATION

December 1, 1962

There are few decisions more delicate or fraught with consequences for the Christian life than those pertaining to the nature of revelation and the sources of Christian doctrine. Now that the Second Vatican Council turns its attention to these issues, Catholics the world over should intensify their prayers that the Spirit of Truth may so guide the assembled Fathers that their determinations will not merely be free from error—this we can presume—but will positively serve the needs of the apostolate in our time.

One question which had inevitably to come before the Fathers concerns the relationship between scripture and tradition. According to the Council of Trent, the Christian revelation is “contained in written books and in unwritten traditions which . . . have come down to us.” This decree unquestionably settled the divine authority of both the inspired scriptures and of nonscriptural tradition. But it is highly doubtful that the council meant to define the relationship between these two authoritative sources. Many Catholic theologians today hold that Trent deliberately refrained from pronouncing on the further question whether there are any dogmas of faith contained, not in the Bible, but only in tradition.

The modern Catholic, thinking of certain doctrines such as the Immaculate Conception and the assumption of the Blessed Virgin, is normally inclined to imagine that they must have been handed down from the earliest times by oral tradition alone. But

this assumption, on reflection, appears rather naive. Is it historically probable that any Christian of the first three centuries, if asked about the matter, would have been able to form a clear idea of what is meant by the Immaculate Conception? The doctrine depends for its intelligibility on various points concerning original sin and redemption which were not clarified until much later. And even if we allow the hypothesis that the early popes and bishops explicitly believed in these doctrines, their views can hardly be regarded as the true source for the Church's recent dogmatic affirmations. For this to be the case there would have to be reliable historical testimonies from the earliest period, which are in fact lacking.

For reasons such as these, some Catholic theologians hold that many modern dogmas, while truly belonging to the primitive Christian tradition, were originally held only in a global and implicit form. In this view, it is quite probable that these truths were no more explicitly affirmed in apostolic tradition than they are in the Bible itself. Some would say that these doctrines are in scripture, not according to its obvious literal meaning, but in some deeper or fuller sense—a sense gradually discerned by the Church as it prayerfully ponders on the word committed to it. If this be true, there is no cogent reason for contending that there are “more truths” contained in apostolic tradition than in the inspired scriptures.

Some would object at this point. There is at least one defined doctrine evidently not found in the Bible itself, namely, the canon or authoritative catalog of the inspired books. But even this is not so obvious. As we study the history of the canon, it becomes apparent that the Church, in drawing up the catalog of sacred books, does not seem to have relied primarily on explicit testimonies to their inspiration handed down from apostolic times. To a great extent, the question of canonicity appears to have been settled by the Church's sense of the quality of the books themselves. This was perhaps the decisive factor in overcoming hesitations that had lasted in some cases (e.g., for Hebrews, James,

and 2 Peter) for several centuries. Thus Catholics need not totally reject the view, widely held among the Protestants in our time, that the Holy Scriptures manifested themselves to the Church as inspired.

Questions such as these are highly involved. There is much to be said on both sides, and no one can presently predict what, if anything, the council is likely to say. Very likely, the Fathers will settle only what is most essential, not going appreciably beyond what has been said by earlier councils, but leaving Catholic theologians the liberty and responsibility to work out the finer technicalities. A decree that undertook to decide more than has presently become clear to the consciousness of the Church would not in fact advance matters. It would provide only an apparent solution.

A second great problem which the council may take up has to do with the application of modern tools of scholarship to the study of the Holy Scriptures. Many popes since Leo XIII have lent their support to this endeavor; they have encouraged Catholic biblicalists to take full advantage of all the techniques afforded by present-day archeology, linguistics, and literary analysis. But in recent years there has been a rather outspoken minority who feel that this approach is dangerous and unsound. Fear is expressed that such scrutiny of the holy books may end up by casting doubt upon their historical accuracy.

This apprehension is rarely if ever felt by Catholic scripture scholars who have become accustomed to the new approach. On the contrary, they quite unanimously declare that their scientific formation makes them better able to appreciate the degree and kind of historicity with which God evidently wished to endow his inspired Word. They are convinced that the type of historical truth contained in the Bible cannot be adequately judged by modern and Western norms without reference to ancient Hebrew literary conventions. The encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) encouraged Catholic exegetes to go about their task without fear of molestation from those whose piety was less sophisticated.

The biblical scholars as a group are hopeful that the Second Vatican Council will ratify and underscore the charter already given, in less solemn form, by the encyclical of 1943. It is urgent, they feel, for the Church to state in clear terms that it wishes to make use of all the light which human learning can supply for the better understanding of the Word of God.

Each of the issues mentioned in this note is intimately related to the goals for which Pope John XXIII convened the present council. He did not want the council to smother any new tendencies in the Church that are sound and healthy; he had no desire to consecrate the conservatism of an older generation. On the contrary, his professed aim was to renew the Church and to adapt its thinking and practices to the needs of the contemporary world. He further expressed the hope that the council, instead of erecting new barriers between Catholics and other Christians, would in every way facilitate friendly conversation between believers of different communions.

The more recent theological opinion on the relation between scripture and tradition, which would regard them as two aspects of a single source, rather than as two separate deposits, has made it possible for Catholics to find a meeting ground with Protestants. They can agree with Protestants that in some genuine sense all revelation is contained in scripture, while insisting at the same time that scripture never discloses its full meaning unless read in the atmosphere of authentic tradition. In a similar way, the new tendency to apply the tools of scholarly research to the Bible has fostered lively and fruitful contacts with non-Catholic scholars. It has provided a common basis for discussion with men of learning who do not share the Church's exegetical tradition. If the Second Vatican Council finds a way of encouraging these twin tendencies, it will discharge an important part of its mission. Such action will make it easier for the Church to renew itself according to the Gospel and pave the way for more cordial conversation with our separated brethren.

2. FAITH AND DOUBT

March 11, 1967

Many sincere Christians in our time are tormented by the feeling that they ought to be perfectly certain about matters of faith, while in fact they are not. They are gnawed by doubts that strike at the roots of their religious life and cause inner anxiety of spirit. To what extent, they ask, can and must the believer be certain about his faith?

Faith is by its nature a commitment, and without firmness there is no commitment. The biblical idea of faith is clearly opposed to doubt, as appears from the story of Zachary (Lk 1:18–20) and the words of the risen Jesus to his bewildered disciples (Lk 24:38; Jn 20:27). As a decision arising from the very center of the person, faith engages a man totally to the One who can command his full devotion. It therefore surpasses in existential weight those relatively superficial assents to general, abstract, or inconsequential truths in which one is not personally involved. In this sense faith requires certitude.

The Catholic is committed by his faith not simply, as all Christians are, to God's self-giving in Christ, but to a Church that claims power to pronounce decisively on doctrinal questions. Adherence to the Church implies acceptance of all its dogmas. While regarding the Church as their spiritual home, they feel authorized to take a somewhat critical attitude toward it, as a good citizen does toward his government or a loyal son toward his parents. Can their doubts be reconciled with their remaining in the Church?

In many cases, the questioning is confined to particular doctrines. Clearly accepting God, Christ, and the Church, the believer

hesitates with regard to certain teachings, often of a technical or peripheral character. He may wonder about the “two natures” in Christ, about certain Marian privileges, or about some miraculous events of biblical history. So long as these doubts are not willful or arrogant, but honest and humble, there is no cause for alarm. In many instances, the questioner misunderstands the formula he is attacking. At other times, what he is rejecting is not a dogma but a reformable Church teaching, or even a mere popular belief. Or perhaps he is not rejecting anything, but simply saying that he can make no sense of what he hears; he cannot see its value or relevance. Or he might even assent on the level of deliberate commitment, without being able to suppress hesitations that trouble his mind and heart.

In all such cases it is important to move slowly. The priest or counselor should not be too hasty in demanding a full and enthusiastic commitment to doctrines that are scarcely understood. If we keep the emphasis on the saving mysteries at the heart of Christian faith, which grip us with their inner power, other teachings will gradually fall into place. With the growing stress on religious freedom and pluralism—within the Church as well as beyond its borders—we shall have to be more patient than in the past. We must expect individual believers to build their lives primarily upon those affirmations that they find religiously important. Provided a man does not deny the teaching authority of the Church, he may be permitted to pay less attention to peripheral doctrines that he cannot presently assimilate. At most, he can give such truths what Newman would call a “notional” (rather than “real”) assent. Only after prolonged and prayerful study does the full relevance of certain doctrines come into view.

More serious are those doubts that seem to call into question the stance of faith itself. Many believers in our day are attacked by the suspicion that faith, as such, may be unwarranted. They are tempted to reject Christianity altogether and base their lives on what seems obvious and clear from experience. If a person

has such feelings, he should not be distressed, as though his faith ought not to be threatened. By its nature, faith is suspended over the abyss of unbelief, and hence is liable to be questioned at any time. Caught in the grip of involuntary doubt, the believer must continually turn to God with fresh humility. "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mk 9:23).

When taken too much for granted, faith degenerates into superstition or fanaticism. When seared by doubt, it comes into its own as faith; it proves itself as steadfast adherence to the unseen God. The man of faith, like Abraham, ventures boldly into the unknown and hopes against hope (Heb 11:8; Rom 4:8). Relying on God's Word alone, faith grounds man's existence in its true source and gives solidity to his whole life. "Unless your faith is firm," said Isaiah to King Ahaz, "you shall not be firm" (Is 7:9).

3. FAITH AND DOGMATIC PLURALISM

May 13, 1967

Faith is not in the first place an assent to dogmas, but an adherence to God as he discloses himself in Jesus Christ. Vatican Council II calls it “an obedience by which man entrusts his whole self freely to God” (*Constitution on Divine Revelation* 5). Dogmas are official statements that accurately express certain limited aspects of the faith, but the Gospel itself is too rich and dynamic to be fitted into even the most carefully chiseled formula.

In the early generations, Christianity existed with few if any statements of that precise and authoritative kind which we today call dogmas. Since the fourth century, however, dogmatic pronouncements have increased in number and subtlety to the point where they are today felt to be a burden. The multiplicity of dogmas can make us lose sight of the unity of the faith. Must the believer feel obliged to find his way to God by accepting each and every dogma?

Once a dogma is enacted, it cannot be simply reversed—not, at least, according to the Catholic view. But this does not mean that it must be imposed upon every individual as an explicit object of his assent. Quite evidently, the Papuan aborigine cannot be held to confess that the Father and the Son are not two principles but one co-principle of the Holy Spirit! With respect to certain dogmas, many of our contemporaries feel not unlike the Papuan aborigine. The Hellenistic and scholastic thought world in which most dogmas took shape is no longer our world. Hence

Pope John called upon Vatican Council II to restate the faith in the “literary forms of modern thought.”

As a pastoral council, Vatican II generally avoided technical expressions. A recent investigation apparently failed to detect in the eight-hundred-odd pages of the council documents any statement that Christ had “two natures.” While this venerable doctrine is true enough if rightly understood, it can be misleading. It may make people think of Christ as a divine-human centaur—as one who went through life on two levels, with his two intellects and wills separated from each other like passengers on different decks of the same bus. So interpreted, the dogma strikes many as incredible and repugnant. We must squarely face the question whether, in clinging to the ancient formula, we are not preventing men from looking on Christ as the contemporary Christian should.

Recognizing that dogmatic formulations are culturally conditioned, the Church can accept a certain dogmatic pluralism. At the Council of Florence, in 1439, it was agreed that the Greeks who came into union with Rome should not be required to confess in their creeds that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son; they could continue to say, as they previously had, that he proceeds from the Father through the Son. The two formulas sound quite different, but the Church recognized that the mystery was too deep to be encompassed by either of them.

The *Decree on Ecumenism* teaches (17–18) that many of the theological formulations that have been disputed East and West are complementary rather than conflicting. “In order to restore communion and unity or preserve them, one must ‘impose no burden beyond what is indispensable’ (Acts 15:28).” The unity of faith that holds the Church together need not consist in the acceptance of the same formulas by all; its basis is Christ, who can bind together men who speak about him in different ways.

This does not mean that every manner of speaking in the Church is legitimate. The confessional writings of different groups must be carefully appraised in the light of the Gospel.

No doubt corrections will be needed before some of them can be accepted. But it may prove unnecessary to require, as a precondition of unity, that all should accept exactly the same dogmatic formulations. With certain explanations, the Protestant may properly say that man is justified by "faith alone" and that "the Bible alone" is the source of saving truth. These slogans do not exclude the necessity of "good works" and of "tradition" as many Catholics today interpret them. Ecumenical progress calls for great toleration with respect to the ways in which the faith is conceptualized and formulated.

According to what we may call the "law of incarnation," the Gospel should be expressed in every age and geographical region according to men's natural genius and cultural endowments. The catholicity of the Church shines forth most splendidly when the Word of God is refracted according to the diverse gifts of various peoples. Their legitimate differences, according to Vatican II (*Constitution on the Church* 13), "do not hinder unity but rather contribute to it."