

## THING ON

# REVELATION

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**In Theology** Revelation is a Latinate word based on the notion of “unveiling”; it means the disclosure by God of something previously unknown.

*Primary Revelation* refers to words and events of history which have this quality of disclosure.

*Secondary Revelation* refers to God’s revelation through the created world.

Christ himself is the ultimate Revealer; he is also the active process of disclosure - the Revelation; he is also the whole content of Revelation.

God manifests himself to us personally, and this invites from us a personal *response* which we call faith. God also makes us aware of himself in various divine truths. So we can consider the concept of faith as referring to the *single fact* of our trusting in God, which is something simple and all-embracing, involving our whole personality when we say: “I believe in God.” Or we can consider faith as a series of affirmations about God, when we say, “This is what the God I believe in is like.”

Modern theologians are interested in the way in which God reveals himself to those who believe in him, in other words, they see revelation as taking place in the context of a personal relationship between God and a believer; and this has been recognized to happen even beyond the borders of institutional Christianity (the Church).

The Vatican Council document on Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) sees revelation operating in two streams - Scripture and Tradition. The concept of Tradition is clearly open to the world of interaction and relationship within the Church; we ourselves are participants in, and contributors to, the Church’s tradition. But there is a reservation: *the enshrining of tradition in a written form that becomes normative to the Church* is reserved to the official teaching authority of the Church (*the magisterium*). As the Council Document puts it:

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, *whether in its written form or in the form of tradition*, is entrusted to the living teaching authority of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. The magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant; it teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devoutly, guards it reverently, and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed, it draws from this sole deposit of faith.

Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium all hang together organically; none of them can function properly without the others.

**The Contribution of Scripture Scholarship** It is the Church’s belief that the Scriptures were created under the inspiration of God. The books of the Old and New Testament, as recognized from apostolic times, “have God as their author”. They were made by people chosen by God, who acted as true authors in the making of the holy books; but in their authorship they were inspired to include “everything God wanted included and nothing more”.

It is in this sense that we say that *the Scripture does not err*. It teaches what God wanted us to

be taught for our salvation.

We have to acknowledge the human element in the composition of Scripture, which is of course open to all the human errors. (E.g., Mark's Gospel undoubtedly says that Abiathar was High Priest, when in fact it should say Ahimelech.) God's employment of human authors would appear to take that kind of inaccuracy in its stride. We have to search out, therefore, *what the sacred authors intended to convey* when they did their literary work. When we have isolated what they wanted to say, we have discovered the Word of God. The correct notion of the Scripture is thus *the Word of God in the words of humanity*. We must give attention to the *kind of writing* we are presented with: is it history? Poetry? Allegory? Myth? Fable? Epic? And even within those genres, there are further determinations: what sort of history (anecdotal? Formal chronicle? Legendary?) Truth is not all of one kind, and a declaration of faith in the Bible has to take account of that. We must come to realize that God can express himself through a cartoon strip (like the book of Jonah) just as easily as through a piece of theology (Ephesians) or a story about a family feud (the story of Joseph) or a completely pagan legend (Noah's Ark). The only problems come when we try to treat all these forms together. In order to do this, we have to have read them separately, equipped with clear knowledge of

the meaning which the sacred writers, in given situations and granted the circumstances of their times and culture, intended to express and did in fact express, *through the medium of a contemporary literary form*. Rightly to understand what the sacred authors wanted to affirm in their work, due attention must be paid both to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech, and narrative prevailing *in their time*, and to the conventions which people then observed in their dealings with one another.

Only when we have done this work - demanding, scholarly work - can we proceed to site the books properly in the whole context of scriptural revelation. This must take into account the tradition of the entire Church.

**A Complex Reality** The Church's idea of revelation is thus a very complex one: it contains a very full theory of inspiration - so that the Scripture is properly called the word and self-communication of God; but also a thorough acceptance of the human writers, and their literary functioning, as the locus of revelation. You could say that the writing of Scripture truly *incarnates* the Word of God, and the Council document refers to it as "a form of sacrament". The theory of revelation contained in the Council Document is of great significance. It relegates to the dead past a great deal of unworthy theorizing and conservative, even anti-intellectual decrees on the part of the early Pontifical Biblical Commission, which claimed that Moses was substantially the author of the first five books of the Bible (*Pentateuch* or *Torah*) - despite the fact that Deuteronomy was certainly written at the end of the Babylonian exile (fifth century BC) whilst Moses lived at the beginning of the 1300's BC. They also demanded that Catholics believe that most of the Psalms were by King David, that the Gospels were by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and so on. At the time of the Council an edict was promulgated giving Catholics "complete freedom with respect to the earlier decrees of the PBC". This immediately catapulted the Catholic theologians into Biblical scholarship, and very rapidly they took their proper place in the world of Biblical studies.