

DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE AND THE ECUMENICAL PROBLEM

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IN THE great ferment that the Spirit of God is producing today for the reunion of Christians, the Catholic Church sometimes gives the appearance of a hard, unyielding substance, hostile to influence, repelling all advances, impossible to assimilate. Other churches reach a *modus vivendi* in work and worship; they even subscribe to the same confession of faith and join in full union. The Catholics stand apart, aloof, uncompromising, strangers to the gentle ways of give and take. If you discuss doctrines with them, their dogmatic tone is a rebuke to your tentatives. Invite them to common worship, and they point to a prohibition of any participation in the religious rites of those outside their own family. According to even friendly writers, we are "difficult," "rigid," "unswerving," "exclusive."

The question, however, is: How inflexible—or flexible, as the case may be—is Catholic dogma? The purpose here is eirenic discussion. But the question arises instantly: Can one discuss the matter eirenicly without prejudging the very point at issue? For, if dogma should turn out to be inflexible and our attitude towards it the total involvement of faith, we cannot set it in a state of doubt or call it in question, and the one way to maintain a measure of peace is to refrain from discussion altogether. I do not think, however, that the argument holds. There are always two questions: the question of truth, and the question of understanding. If the commitment of faith excludes all real doubt on the truth of what we believe, it does not forbid the pursuit of understanding; it still allows us to raise the second question: What do you mean by this article of faith? How do you understand the matter? In that sense, inquiry and discussion are open to us; and, in that sense, I put and will try to answer the question: How inflexible is Catholic dogma?

In doing so, I conceive that I write for both Catholics and Protestants. On our side, to engage in controversy without understanding the issues involved would be simply to "tear and hack instead of cutting

clean"; and, on the other side, the Protestant has the right to hear as exactly as we can state it our position on the unchanging validity of Catholic dogma. Are we committed irrevocably to the Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, Chalcedon, Trent, and Vatican, to the papal definitions of 1854 and 1950? Or are conciliar and papal pronouncements of ephemeral value, useful and even necessary in their time, but open to eventual abandonment? Or can we distinguish absolute and relative aspects in dogma? If so, how do we distinguish them, and how do we set limits to our relativism?

And here I must further specify and limit my subject. So manifold are the departments of religious knowledge involved, so complex the interlocking problems that arise, so little elaborated the notions necessary to their solution, that I despair of doing justice to the question in a few pages. What perhaps I can do is define the chief areas of discussion and reduce the variety of issues to the simplicity of fundamental, underlying ideas. Those areas seem to me to be these two: the absolute character of dogma, and the relative character of the conceptions used in dogma. Further, the absolute character of dogma seems to me to be only a very special case of the absolute that truth in general is; likewise, the relative character of religious concepts seems to me to be reducible to the relative nature of human concepts in general, which condemns them to change and development. I hope, by thus setting the problem within the context of the generic issues involved, to contribute something to the perspective in which it is viewed.

IDENTIFYING CATHOLIC DOGMA

My subject is doctrine, and, as a science supposes its principles without proving them, I allow myself to suppose the role of dogma in the Church and in the ecumenical movement. I know our Protestant friends think we exaggerate that role, and certainly I would not myself attempt on any grounds other than doctrinal to justify the Catholic aloofness. I do not argue that point now. But it is very important here to disengage what is Catholic doctrine in the strict sense that all Catholics are bound to believe it as divinely revealed—let us call this simply dogma—from Catholic doctrine in the much broader sense that it is generally taught and held, but as opinion, by way of conclusion, as

matter closely connected with what has been revealed, and not as binding in faith.

There are dogmas enough which bind in faith, but they do not form an unmanageable multitude. One could count them up, beginning with the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed, and would reach, I estimate roughly, something like two or three hundred, depending on how one divides or joins related articles. But there is a vast body of doctrine included in the theology manuals or preached from the Sunday pulpit that does not fulfil the requirements of dogma. Thus, there are 590 articles of doctrine in the first part alone of the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas; this part is only about one fifth of the *Summa* as St. Thomas left it, and that work is only about one fifth again of his total production. Even when we take account of a good deal of overlapping and omit the Thomist propositions no longer taught, the total is large indeed; and if we add the multitudinous doctrines developed or set forth in the last seven centuries (just think, for one example, of the social encyclicals of recent popes), we have a truly enormous body of teaching. Now this, I think, is what one ordinarily means by Catholic doctrine; yet, of the innumerable items included, by far the greater number are not of faith at all.

There is, then, an order and gradation and hierarchy in our teaching which calls for careful differentiation. As the royal head of a country is surrounded by a body noble consisting of dukes, earls, viscounts, barons, and so on, in an order that runs through various ranks, so the body doctrinal of the Catholic Church is a complex organization that begins with articles of faith, extends to doctrines hovering on the threshold of faith and to conclusions solidly established, and ends far out on the periphery with simple matters of opinion or perhaps the merely reactionary start of fear at anything new.

Let me illustrate. That there are two natures and one person in Christ is an article of defined Catholic faith; its obstinate denial is heresy and incurs excommunication. But that Christ in His human nature had that grace which in us is sanctifying, while commonly held by theologians, is not defined and is not Catholic dogma in the strict sense in which I am using the word; one could not deny it, as we say, without temerity, but to do so would not make one liable to the censure

of heresy. At a still further remove is the question of the human Self-consciousness of Christ; it has come to the fore only recently, the Church has not yet taken a stand on many of its aspects, and Catholics freely avail themselves of the wide area of liberty open to them in discussing it.

It is quite important not to regard Catholic doctrine as a monolithic structure in which truth stands calm and clear, pointing a pure finger to the eternal mind of God; it is much more like a growing tree, with a trunk that yearly forms more solidly, but with many branches projecting at odd angles and unexpected places, some unduly developed, others neglected, branches twisting this way and that towards the light, putting out tentative shoots that may be destined for an early death, or biding their time till external circumstances or the inner working of the Spirit promotes development.

The writings of Aquinas are probably a source of error in this regard. In them, articles of faith lie side by side with mere opinions, almost without distinction. We simply have to remember, in reading him, that St. Thomas was concerned with understanding, not with measuring certitudes. Theologians nowadays have more elaborate (and sometimes tedious) techniques, forced on them partly by the requirements of controversy, partly by the very evolution of scientific method, for determining accurately the truth-status of their doctrines.

It is also easy to be deceived by the immediately observable phenomena of Catholic life. One sees a Catholic going to Mass on Sunday and saying his beads daily; a simple calculation shows that he spends about equal amounts of time on the two activities, and one might conclude that he regards them as equally important. Or one finds Catholics rejecting divorce, abstaining from meat on Friday, defending their bishop with animation, and arguing at Ottawa for a Canadian representative at the Vatican Court; what is simpler than to put all these activities on one dead level of equality? However, the conclusion is quite wrong. There are many degrees of authority in the utterances of pope and bishop, many degrees of obligation (or no obligation at all) in the practices of Catholics, many degrees of importance (not measured by the time allotted to them) in the various exercises of Catholic piety.

It would greatly profit Catholic-Protestant discussion to run

through the doctrines that give most trouble: those dealing with grace, the Mass and sacraments, the Mother of our Lord, etc., and separate what is definitively required in faith from what is of infra-credal importance. But it would be a tedious process, and on its completion we would not yet have reached the fundamental question. Even when the Protestant has learned how restricted the range of our dogmas is, the question will remain: By what right do you hold even those dogmas to be of absolute validity? Moreover, the rational Protestant will be concerned not only about what we now hold, but about what we are likely to be holding in the year 2500; and since there is no predicting the particular dogmas that the Church under the Spirit of God will bring to light in future ages, the one possible way of meeting his question is to show him the forces at work, the principles operating, in the genesis and conservation of doctrine. Thus, we are forced back to the nature of dogma, the principles that lead to its emergence, the factors that govern flexibility and inflexibility in this field. If I were a Protestant, I would be satisfied with nothing less, and, asked to explain my Catholic position, I must push investigation to this point, at least to the extent that I find possible in this short article.

DOGMA AS ABSOLUTE

The first of the two areas to be demarcated is that of the absolute and its application to dogma. For it is the absolute character of dogma that we mean by its inflexibility, absolute as opposed to relative: the contrast supposed in the phrase "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall not pass away." What is the absolute, and in what sense is dogma absolute? It will be my first task to answer these questions, and, although my tone may seem excessively assertorial, my basic intention is not to argue or domineer, but to expose my understanding of the case.

Being and Truth: Absolutes

The absolute is the unconditioned, either the formally, intrinsically unconditioned that is God alone, or the virtually unconditioned of the created universe where there were conditions but they have been fulfilled (Lonergan's terms). We are concerned with the second sense;

here, the absolute is whatever is, in so far as it is. Tomorrow's weather is not absolute; it is conditioned by various factors, including God's conservation of the universe. But yesterday's weather has passed from the conditioned to the absolute; it has its place in the universe of being; it is no longer merely possible, what will be if . . . but belongs to the order of existence. It may have made only a fleeting entry on an unimportant sector of a desultory action, but that entry cannot now or ever be erased from history; it belongs to the granite mountains of being. Charles Lamb's dream-children, on the contrary, remain just dream-children forever; they belong to the might-have-been, they were subject to various conditions never fulfilled; they are fixed in the dark depths of nothing.

Let us not judge the character of being from the temporal aspect of the visible world. All too familiar is our experience of the passing nature of things. The happy days of youth, the projects on which I poured my sweat and tears, the dear ones who were the very half of my soul, all slip away and vanish in that night of the past and gone which, to sensitively oriented man, seems synonymous with the region of nothing. Our total human existence is spread out over time, and the total is never ours to possess; at any moment it is only an elusive instant which, as soon as we attempt to seize it, flees our grasp, only a pin point of light enclosed by the two vast darknesses of what has gone and what has not yet arrived. We make our pitiful attempts to possess it as a whole, especially to retain the extended experience of the past: thus the role of the album of photos, of mementos, diaries, reminiscences; thus the technique of the movie which completes its tale of a lifetime and closes with a series of rapid flashbacks to departed scenes, as if to gather up in artistic unity and hold in one concentrated moment the totality of joys and sorrows that alternate in the life of a man. But the net effect is only to emphasize with an inexpressibly piercing sadness the temporal character of human existence.

The absolute character of being transcends the temporal nature of men, who "look before and after, and pine for what is not." For eternal being, the perfect possession, all in one simultaneous fulness, of endless life—"interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio"—the point is clear enough. But vaguely we recognize that even temporal being is not, as being, temporal. Obscurely we conceive the being of

things *sub specie aeternitatis*, in a manner analogous to their presence to God. The notion is implicit in the manifestly irrevocable character of all that has been: "nor all thy Piety nor Wit/Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line." If we look to the future, we find it again dimly present in the (as yet theologically unanalyzed) hope we have for the recovery of all we have lost in the swiftly flowing passage of time. Most clearly of all, the notion appears in our recognition of the enduring influence through eternity of what we have done with our lives on earth: "Let them rest from their toil, for their works will go with them." It is this atemporal aspect of being that we have in mind in speaking of the absolute character of whatever is.

Truth is the cognitional counterpart of ontological is-ness, and like the being of things it is absolute. We may have trouble finding it in particular cases and a grave epistemological problem in explaining its foundations in general, but when we reach it we are beyond the relative; we know; our minds are at rest on the granite mountains of being. If Caesar crossed the Rubicon, his crossing belongs to the absolute universe of being, and the true affirmation of his crossing is absolute in the sphere of knowing; it now is *absolutely true*, true for any mind whatever, true at any place whatever, true at any time whatever. Truth is fact, as opposed to ideas, opinion, theory, probability, guesswork, surmise. It is the term of scientific research. The idea is not enough; tell a group of scientists of your Major Hoople scheme for reaching the moon, and they will laugh at you. Neither is probability enough; we may have to be content with it, but as long as hope remains of learning the facts, experiment will continue.

The absolute character of truth is not nullified by a particular relation to the subject speaking. If I say truly that Caesar crossed the Rubicon two thousand years ago, this statement will be just as true five hundred years hence as it is now, though the words must be changed to utter it then. If I say that the sun rises in the east, describes an arc over my head, and sets in the west, this is just as true for someone at the North Pole who these June days sees the sun moving in a level course around the horizon as it is for me at a latitude of 44 degrees. No one who truly describes the sun's course in relation to me can deny my statement.

Meaning of "Is"

There is a persistent modern problem about the absolute character of truth, and it crops up in a whole range of sciences. We have to do with the validity of the word "is," used not as a copula but as declaring existence. Hardly any word is spoken more readily by the common man, and hardly any word gives more trouble to the thinker who tries to assign its meaning, its object, the conditions of its rational utterance. Although ecumenists may at present have only a remote interest in the particular manifestations of this difficulty, I think it will be useful, because of the altogether fundamental nature of the problem, to indicate briefly some five of them.

First, there is a phenomenology that would concentrate on the forms of things (the eidetic) and practice a systematic abstention (*epochē*) with regard to judgment of existence. Next, the existentialist might be supposed from his name to be concerned with the is-ness of things, but actually, instead of going on from the eidetic of phenomenology to the rationally founded judgment of existence in the Thomist sense, he falls back towards the experiential level in a description of human subjectivity; when he talks of "being," as he does, his "being" is largely a myth supplying the imagination with an object. Again, scientists think of some concepts as constructs which satisfy the imagination and are useful as a basis for further investigation but do not give a true picture of reality; and sometimes they take it for granted that science must be content with such constructs. Then, there is a cognitional theory known as the *als ob* ("as if") philosophy, the idea behind which is that our knowledge is a network of unverifiable fictions, but the fictions work as if they were true. Finally, mathematicians, who were once thought to provide the prize exhibits in the class of universal and necessary truths, were first disturbed at discovering that the old mathematics was just one in a whole series of possible systems, and then ended by doubting the truth-foundations of mathematics in general.

All these seem to me to be manifestations of the same basic trouble, namely, the uneasiness of thinkers about the existential value of the word "is." There is, in fact, a real difficulty in analyzing and justifying our use of it. In Lonergan's theory of the human mind, we have eyes

of the body with which to see colors, we have an intellectual power (call it "the eyes of the spirit" to indicate the directness of its insight, but the comparison limps badly) with which to understand data, but we have no faculty for the direct intuition of being, though the mind's natural drive is the intention of being. We know the existence of things, therefore, not by looking at existence, but by reflecting on our ideas, and by a dialectical, self-correcting process of excluding sources of error, coming to the virtually unconditioned judgment, uttering the word "is," and thus knowing being. Though I cannot prove it with chapter and verse in this article, I think that explanation accounts for the thinker's difficulty with "is," and equally well it leaves room for the spontaneity of the common man's use of the word. For to know my knowing, I have to analyze it, and analysis of reflective mental processes is a very subtle matter; but to know being, I do not have to analyze my knowing, I simply let the natural dynamism of my mind operate, and spontaneously, through the intention of being which is its native endowment, it comes to rational judgment of what is.

Now there is an epistemology of faith as well as of knowledge. But that sort of problem is not the concern of either the believer or the man of common sense; in each case it is the thinker's task to provide explanation. As the man of common sense spontaneously utters his "is" and implicitly trusts its validity, so the man of faith utters his creed without worrying over the epistemology of his act. But to utter a credo is to use either the word "is" or its equivalent in the form of the sentence (some languages lack the word itself) or in some significant action. Thus, the author of the fourth Gospel wrote his book that we might "believe that Jesus *is* the Christ, the Son of God." One of the earliest credal elements in the New Testament is the profession of faith "Jesus (*is*) Lord." The councils continue the tradition in their anathemas: "If anyone refuses to say that Christ *is* at once God and man, let him be anathema."

Principle of Noncontradiction

The absolute character of "is" utterly excludes "is not." When philosophy had begun to achieve some independence of theology in the Middle Ages, and Catholic thinkers found difficulty in reconciling the doctrine of faith with that of reason, it was proposed to cut the

Gordian knot by simply admitting a contradiction; it was the principle of the double truth, condemned in the Fifth Lateran Council. When science in a later day also aspired to independence, and religious thinkers began to find apparent contradictions between their faith and their science, some of them made a similar proposal, only to meet with a similar condemnation in the Vatican Council.

In our own generation there is a third attempt to make the principle of noncontradiction a little less than absolute. The attack is often vaguely put, and it is difficult for that reason to meet it squarely, but specialists in the ancient Hebrew mentality seem to be asking us whether the principle does not enshrine rather a peculiarity of the Western mind than an ultimate principle to which every mind must spontaneously subscribe, for it seems they find one writer in the Bible saying just the opposite of another without regard for our famous principle. If my understanding of it is correct, this position is just as fatal to the absolute character of truth as its two predecessors, and it is highly desirable that it be set forth with the clarity and distinctness that will allow us to meet it. Meanwhile, I make three brief points. First, one must respect the authority of specialists in their own field; however, a comparison of Western mentality with the Oriental takes one outside the specialty of the Orientalist and supposes a general cognitional theory within the context of which the comparison is made; the argument from authority is not, therefore, convincing. Next, as a psychologist can spot clues to mental conflict in his patient that escape the notice of amateurs, so a cognitional theorist can find, in the unreflecting procedures of a people, their questions, their quarrels, their legal processes (what the French might call their "logique vécue"), evidence for the principle of noncontradiction to which others may be blind. Finally, we will quite rightly be asked to account for the data on which the specialists base their position, but I think this can be done by a study of the difference between proverbial and academic discourse, without any necessity of making the Hebrew an exception to the basic laws of human thinking. The study is too long to undertake here (I refer the reader to Lonergan's account of common sense in his *Insight*), but what I mean can perhaps be shown briefly in an example. A father wishing to repair his typewriter in peace, tells his helpful children: "Too many cooks spoil the broth."

The next day, when there are leaves to rake, he enlists their help with the sage remark: "Many hands make light work." Is he contradicting himself? Or does analysis show each statement to be true in the sense intended but not at all well defined?

What may not be contradicted at one time may not be contradicted at any time whatever. That is part of the absolute character of truth. If ever the Church, under the Spirit of God, defined the Son to be consubstantial with the Father, no one may ever, without heresy, deny consubstantiality in the sense in which it was defined. If ever the Church, under the same Spirit, defined that transubstantiation takes place in the Mass, it is forever impossible to deny that transubstantiation takes place in the Mass. Definitions are, in the phrase of the Vatican Council, "irreformabiles." The Vatican simply supplies the word and the notion for what was implicit in the decree of Ephesus fourteen centuries earlier: "No one may publish or write or draw up another faith than that defined by the holy Fathers who were united at Nicaea in the Holy Spirit." Ephesus, in turn, merely repeats in its own way what St. Paul declared to the Galatians: "If anyone—even an angel from heaven—preaches a different gospel to you from that you have received, let him be anathema." Or what St. John stated in his letters against the heresies menacing the young Church, denying that Christ has come in the flesh, that He is Son, etc.: "This is anti-Christ."

CONCEPTION AS RELATIVE

The preceding section may discourage ecumenists hoping for some relaxing of Catholic rigidity in doctrine. Of course, it is only half the picture, and I have now to expound the relative aspect inherent not only in dogma but in human formulations in general. But discussion of the relative aspect brings us face to face with the very issue on which, it seems to me, Catholics and Protestants are most diametrically opposed: the validity of the development of dogma. So I fear that what I have to say in my second point, though it softens the stern lines of the first, will offer also new grounds for disagreement.

Ontologically, the absolute is what *is*. Still, we are well enough aware of change in the things that *are*. Elements combine chemically; life evolves in new forms; families, races, empires, civilizations rise

and fall. Not only that, but the sinner becomes a saint, and the good man, by a series of negligences and weak concessions that imperceptibly undermine the foundations of his virtue, becomes suddenly a sinner, a wandering star for whom "the storm of darkness is reserved forever." The existence of things may be absolute, but instability and change, growth and decline, are not thereby precluded.

There is a parallel relativity on the cognitional side in our concepts, but I would like to locate it as accurately as possible. If my conceptions change to correspond with a changing reality, so that today I say it is raining and tomorrow that it is fine, that is not relativity of conception. Conception is relative when two persons say that it is raining, but one has a far better understanding of the phenomenon of rain than the other. Such relativity results from the potentiality of intellect; we grow by slow degrees in understanding, as the material universe grew by slow degrees to its present development; and as reality is composed of an actual element that makes its existence absolute and a potential element that makes it unstable in what it is, so truth is the composition of a relative idea or conception with an absolute affirmation. In the statement "This is a man," the is-ness of the affirmation is meaningful only in conjunction with the what-ness of man; but the two elements are nevertheless distinct, and the idea we have of man may vary considerably without detriment to the absolute character of "is."

Thus, at one time and place, man may be thought of as a two-legged animal without feathers; at another, as an "animal rationale"; at still another, as an "animal symbolicum." All these conceptions may be truly asserted of "this" and so enter the sphere of the absolute. But the conception itself is by no means absolute. There is only one conception that, as conception, is absolute; and that is the Word of God, the Word that the Father is eternally uttering in His Son, the Word that expresses the divine absolute understanding of all that is or may be. Our human conceptions, with some reservations, resemble their ontological counterpart, and are condemned to perpetual change and evolution as we grow in understanding of the reality presented to us.

The reservations are chiefly two. The saint may become a sinner, but the concept of sainthood does not become the concept of sinful-

ness. Understanding grows but concepts do not disintegrate; in the ancient phrase, they are "incorruptible." Secondly, in the evolution of understanding, concepts may reach a limit. Some human concepts, while not absolute, are still ultimate and irreducible for us. For example, all that is comes under the concept of being; outside being there is nothing, and, despite some interesting recent attempts at it, I do not think much progress is possible in the direction of knowing nothing; all we know, then, we know as being. Again, all we understand, we understand by insight into the sensitively presented or imaginatively represented; and this fact determines the structure of our knowing and limits the idea-content to a fixed range. Human conception may be relative, but it is not completely without moorings or condemned to total revolution.

Revelation As Objective and Historical

What I have been saying applies both to religious and to secular knowledge. This very important point is not easily grasped if we lack the necessary distinctions; for then the more we hold fast to the absolute of faith, the more likely we are to carry this absolute character over into the field of conception, where it does not belong. I will try to make my meaning clear.

First, there is God, God who reveals Himself, God who is the one ultimate source of all that we call revelation in its various phases. Then there is His primary revelation for men (we simplify by omitting the angels): this is just the visible world He created, for God speaks to us no less by the created universe than by the printed page of Holy Scripture. As Aquinas said, God uses the things (*res*) of the universe to convey His mind, as men use the written or spoken word (*verba*) to convey theirs. The movement of pen or vocal chord is no less subject to man's dominion than the course of events is subject to divine providence. Things have, therefore, an intelligibility by reason of what they are; they have also a meaning by reason of a Mind that is using them to express Itself. Nor are things an inferior means of communication, as if words openly stated the mind of the speaker, while one could only infer from events the mind of God. No, words are just inkmarks on paper or vibrations in the air apart from the intelligence of speaker or receiver; in themselves, they no more escape

the order of the material and sensible than do things; both are just data, potentially intelligible, on the immediate level; and things, as divine artifacts, are certainly not more unwieldy instruments of meaning than the human artifact of language.

This is crucial, and I apologize if in stressing it I seem to labor the obvious; I have learned that it is not obvious to everyone. Let me say, then, that I am not talking about things in isolation from history, and I am not talking about the natural revelation of the philosophers. If we generalize the principle of St. Thomas, we shall say that the totality of history is God's word (understanding the totality of history in its broadest sense to include the universe in its four-dimensional completeness), all the things that have been, are, or will be; the process of events no less than the substance of things; the one universe, spread out in time and space, subject to slow evolution with the emergence and disappearance of many genera and species, composed of various strata and grades of being, but still forming the unitary expression of the divine revealing intention; the one universe with its natural and supernatural components alike, God's mighty acts in history as well as the puny operations of men, Christ and His mysteries along with cultures and civilizations; the one total history with its sacred and secular aspects of the one total world.

Our next step in developing this idea will be to say that, though this one universe is spread out across incalculable centuries of time and we cannot by any means predict the events of future ages, still the essential meaning of the whole is already given in the structural crown which was the assumption of the material universe through man into the Trinitarian life. There was the sending of the Son by the Father, and His life, death, and resurrection; there was the sending of the Spirit by Father and Son, and the inauguration of the definitive stage in His work of sanctification; there was the coming of Father, Son, and Spirit to inhabit the souls of the just and be their eternal joy in the companionship of the beatific vision. The structure is already given; events of history will roll on to their completion, to the filling up of the number of the elect; one might say, therefore, that the material element of this phase of revelation will not be completed till the last day, but the formal element was completed nineteen centuries ago in the center of time in the Holy Land.

Revelation As Subjective

Besides this phase of revelation, which we may call the objective and historical, there is necessarily given a subjective phase, the inner light needed to interpret the objective and historical. I say "necessarily" given, for it would be useless for God to perform His mighty acts in history for dumb, uncomprehending animals, insensible to the drama being enacted before them; it would be ill-conceived even to perform them for men, were men not properly equipped to interpret them. And since history has a supernatural component beyond the penetration of native human intelligence and judgment, a correspondingly supernatural power of mind is needed on the subjective side.

The subjective side is complex. With regard to the native capacity of the human mind, St. Thomas generalized the situation when, speaking of the origins of human science, he said that knowledge comes partly from intrinsic sources, partly from extrinsic: "partim ab intrinseco . . . partim ab extrinseco." Externally, there are the sensible data which provide the material for all properly human knowledge; internally, there is the light of intellect which is the very power of knowing, "ipse vigor intellectus"; both enter into the genesis of knowledge. Now I believe something analogous must be said about religious knowledge, but we are still greatly handicapped in discussing the question. First, while the variations of that inner religious principle (prophetic light, the charism of inspiration, the grace of faith, the gifts and assistance of the Spirit) have all received a good deal of attention individually, there has not been a correspondingly earnest effort to generalize the principle and bring all its manifestations under the heading of a single concept and within the focus of a single illuminating idea. Next, the principle enunciated by Aquinas has only begun to be exploited by philosophers; most of them have no trouble agreeing with him that all knowledge somehow derives from sense, but few have reached the complementary truth that all knowledge is somehow given in the very power of understanding: "in lumine intellectus agentis nobis est quodammodo omnis scientia originaliter indita" (*De verit.*, q. 10, a. 6). Finally, to inhibit our development and use of the principle, there is the bugbear of idealism which makes us react in suspicion at the mere mention of inner sources of knowledge,

and there is the empiricism which is almost the original sin of the human mind and leads it to assume, for example, that the pages of Holy Scripture rather than their meaning in the mind of the author are the essential reality of the word of God.

Perhaps, however, this much may be said. God uttered in history His conception of Himself and the universe in their relationship to one another, and that conception is the ultimate goal of all our efforts to understand His word. At various times He has given privileged men a guarantee of their understanding and empowered them to communicate it in human ways to their fellow men, Himself speaking in their speaking and thus setting their utterances in historical revelation as a secondary element. Those utterances are privileged in many ways, but I do not think they are absolute either as conception or as expression. Not as conception, for there is but one absolute conception of things, and it is eternal in God; not as expression, for no material sign can be fully and adequately commensurate to the spiritual reality that in this case is signified.

Hierarchy of Catholic Teaching

Thus, the task of religious thought is twofold: to reach the conception of the original privileged interpreters of the divine realities,¹ and then to question the divine realities themselves in a continually renewed effort to reach the unattainable goal which is the absolute conception of God in His eternal Word. In both the one and the other task we are seeking the meaning of a message that was originally given and completed in the apostolic age, but God continues to grant us a corresponding inner light to interpret His message, and we continue to grow in our understanding of it.

I would say, therefore, that to call the Catholic Church rigid and unswerving in doctrine is to utter a great truth, but it is also to leave

¹ There is an important distinction between the conception and the expression of these privileged interpreters. Expression is an artifact that lags behind the generic idea, as means for reaching the moon lag behind the conceived purpose. In the beginning, interpretation of the divine realities is communicated far more by a way of doing things, gestures, songs, a ritual, than by articulated propositions, books, treatises. In the evolution of expression, the gesture may give way to myths as a form, the myth to parables, the parables to propositions in a creed. It is possible for one and the same truth to be expressed in all these forms, but expression grows more and more technical in the effort to be adequate to the truth it bodies forth.

another great truth unsaid. We are rigid in adhering to all guaranteed interpretations of revelation, whether the Church proposes them through her Holy Scriptures or through her conciliar definitions. But we are not rigid at all in regarding those interpretations as exhausting the possibilities of human understanding. Any particular interpretation, biblical or conciliar, may be but a partial view subject to completion, it may be of almost negligible importance in the total picture, or even of ephemeral value as an expression suited to one particular time or people. The reader may test my point by taking a little book of Vincent Taylor called *The Names of Jesus*, which lists forty-two titles or classes of titles that the New Testament gives to Christ, and asking himself these two questions: Is every title part of the deposit of divine truth and obligatory in faith? Has every title equal significance for piety or preaching or theology? My answer to the first question would be, Yes, and to the second, No. But whoever answers the second question as I do, is admitting, I think, the relative character of New Testament concepts and may not be far from conceiving the possibility of development in our conception of the divine realities revealed.²

If God's conception in revealing Himself is absolute and all human conceptions are partial and relative, it seems to follow that we can question revelation again and again with every new idea that occurs to the mind of man, and need never fear that we are showing irreverence to the divine message; we are simply trying to understand with all the forces at our disposal what God has spoken. Thus, about the turn of the century the publication of Freud's discoveries turned the attention of psychologists to the unconscious and the subconscious. Within a very few years there appeared an attempt by Wm. Sanday (in *Christologies Ancient and Modern*) to understand the union of the two natures in Christ by analogy from the conscious and unconscious in man. The theory had no great success, and I, for one, would hold that we must reject it; but I would also maintain that this sort of inquiry, provided that it be carried out "painstakingly, reverently,

² There is a tendency today to discount the truth value of Scripture and put a premium on its thought patterns. No doubt the tendency corrects an undue emphasis on Scholastic forms of thought, but I think we must oppose the tendency in its basic principles. Not that I deny the profundity of the biblical writers, but their ideas as ideas "abide our question," and each case must be decided on its merits; their truth, on the other hand, calls for total submission.

temperately" (the advice of the Vatican Council), is a legitimate and necessary part of the theologian's task, and that Sanday's effort illustrates, as well as does the Nicene *homoousion*, the forces at work in the development of doctrine. The thinking believer must inquire into the intelligibility and the meaning of the divine realities. He can do so only by forming ideas about them and trying to verify his ideas in the data provided. All ideas are grist for the mill of his thinking, but not all ideas are correct. Some will be rejected, and, of those that are accepted, some will remain merely probable, some will be solidly established, some may enter into the definitions of faith. Thus arises that hierarchical structure of Catholic doctrine which I described in beginning my article.³

It remains that we should not exaggerate the relativity of our concepts, and so I recall the point made earlier: there are ultimate ideas which are akin to an absolute for us, and this holds even for our ideas about God—not that the infinity of God can be encompassed by human thought, but that human thinking is bounded by the possibilities of the thinking subject. I hold, then, that we must admit formulations in theology that are ultimate in the sense that no science of the divine realities that goes to the limit of human possibility can dispense with them, and this applies especially to what are called the metaphysical concepts. But I think also that a similar point may be made about what are called the existential categories of biblical thought. Heidegger distinguishes the *existenziell*, the concrete practical possibilities of the individual person, and the *existenzial*, the horizons of human possibility, marked by being-toward-death, openness to a world of fellow men, etc. The profundity of the biblical writers is most evident in the field of the *existenzial*, where only the very accidental features of their thought have to be translated into the accidents of other times, and for that reason I would say that preaching, which concentrates on the existential and disregards many of the questions a theologian must raise, will always be closer than theology to the concepts and expression of the Bible.

The two problems I have tried in this article to locate within a

³ It is a good question how much of this hierarchical structure is capable of eventual definition and how much must remain below the credal level. Like many other good questions, it has had to be omitted here.

context of general ideas seem to me to be relevant and even basic to the ecumenical dialogue, though I readily admit that they are not the most popular topics of discussion among ecumenists. The first, because of what is called our rigidity, may seem to be an especially Catholic problem; but really it is the problem of all who profess a faith of absolute validity. It regards the very nature of truth and its foundations; only vaguely conceived as yet by the theologians, it is of grave concern to philosophers and underlies a whole host of questionings and murmurings and movements in our day. There are other questions we must face on the level of truth: the guarantee of infallibility, the criterion of truth in the Church, the methodical means of settling conflicts; but the nature of truth itself is fundamental, and I do not see how ecumenists can avoid coming finally to grips with it.

As the first problem regards what I think we really have in common, the second regards our differences. It has to do with the nature of development, its validity, the permanent or ephemeral value of developed forms, the relative character of conception that is the presupposition of all development in doctrine. We are here at the center of the difference between Catholics and Protestants. Mostly, that difference is assumed to center on the famous controversy: Scripture alone *vs.* Scripture and tradition. That question retains its validity, in my view, but not its old position of importance. The crucial question regards the relation between the growing body of developed doctrines—call this “Catholic” tradition in contrast to apostolic tradition—and the sources of revelation, whether those sources be conceived as twofold or single.

When Luther rejected the sprawling inheritance from the Middle Ages to return, as he said, to the Scriptures, the essential core of his action, it seems to me—though he could not in those times put it in these words—was a denial of development. What the Catholics were affirming at Trent—though with a similar handicap in ideas and expression and the consequent necessity of filling in the lacuna with a vaguely conceived doctrine of tradition handed down from the apostles—was the validity of development. The human mind moves slowly and ponderously; it was only three centuries after Trent that the problem was clearly seen by Newman, and a century later we

have still not succeeded in making it central. But with the differences in the immediate interpretation of Scripture now almost eliminated and the differences in regard to apostolic tradition reduced to their proper proportion, we cannot much longer avoid recognizing that the real difference lies in the area of development. And with the real difference located and recognized, perhaps the ideas I have been sketching will prove to be more relevant than appears at first sight.