

Theology of Divine Revelation

Introduction

The concepts of natural revelation and Divine Revelation is very essential to the study of theology. *Theology* is literally the “discussion or study of God.” If we start with the premise that God is the “wholly other,” then we can logically conclude that if God did not choose to reveal himself, there would be no theology and no religion. God must first reach out and embrace us before we can know and embrace God. Further, the study of Revelation is important in helping us to avoid false understandings of God. We must understand how we come to know the truth about God in order to discern between competing claims about who God is and what he wills.

The Catholic teaching is that God reveals himself both through the created order and through unique, divinely inspired modalities. The former is commonly called natural revelation and the latter Divine Revelation. Natural revelation is ongoing, is available to all, is experienced through the gifts of creation and intellect, and can provide profound personal encounters with God. It can also be misleading and can be misused. Divine Revelation is found particularly in salvation history, is fulfilled or completed in Jesus Christ, and is authentically communicated only through Scripture and Tradition. Divine Revelation is safeguarded by the Magisterium, and all Christians have the responsibility to share it with others by our words and actions. We will look more closely first at Divine Revelation and then at natural revelation.

1 Divine Revelation- Definition:

God’s communication of himself, by which he makes known the mystery of his divine plan, a gift of self communication which is realized by deeds and words over time, and the most fully by sending us his own divine Son, Jesus Christ (CCC 50). Divine Revelation is “God’s definitive self-communication, through which he makes known the mystery of his divine plan of salvation”. The process of Divine Revelation has proceeded gradually throughout human history, beginning with Adam and Eve and culminating in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Divine Revelation is communicated through Scripture and Tradition for all of humanity to know and understand. The symbolism in the accounts of the Garden of Eden teach that God revealed himself intimately and immediately to our first parents; this is the meaning of the Genesis accounts. Adam and Eve initially experienced God fully and naturally without anything hindering their loving relationship with him. In catechetical language we say they experienced

full and perfect “communion” with God. However, Adam and Eve’s sin and its consequences—which we call “the Fall”—changed this relationship. The original and natural revelation that Adam and Eve enjoyed continues today through creation, intellect, and relationships. But creation, our intellect, and our relationships are scarred by human sin. Thus we know and understand God in less intimate and immediate ways than he originally intended. So after the Fall, God enacted his wondrous plan of salvation, his plan to bring humanity back into full communion with him. In the Old Testament, we learn how God intentionally revealed himself and his plan for salvation through the covenants he made with his Chosen People and through the prophets he sent to them. His Chosen People, in turn, were to be a light to the world, proclaiming God’s truth to all the nations.

God’s plan for salvation was thwarted time and again by human sin, until it was perfectly fulfilled when he walked among us once again as the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, we learn how God, as Christ, reveals himself to humanity intimately, immediately, and completely. All of Christ’s words and actions are revelatory. In particular, his death, Resurrection, and Ascension reveal to us the fullness of God’s love through the Paschal Mystery, the heart of God’s plan for our salvation.

All Revelation is Trinitarian, the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But in a particular way, it was the work of the Holy Spirit to inspire and guide the Apostles to remember and teach all that they had learned from Christ. We call their teaching the apostolic Tradition, or just Tradition. Though the divine truths of Tradition are unchanging, our understanding of them has deepened as the Holy Spirit guides the Church into all truth, particularly through the teaching of the Magisterium. This has led at times to the announcement of new doctrines, such as the Immaculate Conception of Mary (officially promulgated in 1854) or the infallibility of the Pope (officially promulgated in 1870). These doctrines are not new in the sense that they were not previously true—they are only new in the sense that, although they were present in nascent form since the Apostles, they only reached our full understanding in later times.

The Holy Spirit also inspired the Apostles and their followers to write the Gospels, letters, sermons, and apocalyptic literature that are the books of the New Testament. We call this biblical inspiration, the divine assistance the Holy Spirit gave to the authors of the books of the Bible, both Old and New Testament, so they could communicate in human words all that God

wanted to reveal for the sake of our salvation. The Scriptures flow from the apostolic Tradition because the New Testament is based on the witness of the Apostles, and the Old Testament books were approved and used by Jesus and the Apostles. Both Scripture and Tradition are guided by the same Spirit, and thus they have the same source. Scripture and Tradition are the two authentic modes of transmitting the unity of Divine Revelation, which we also sometimes refer to as the Deposit of Faith.

There are some things to keep in mind when discussing Divine Revelation. The Church does not describe Scripture and Tradition as “sources” of divine truth. God alone is the source of truth. Instead we describe Scripture and Tradition as two modes (or ways) that God’s truth is revealed (or transmitted or taught) to us. Scripture and Tradition are very important, but they are not important for their own sakes. They are important only because they are uniquely able to teach us the truth that God wants us to know for our salvation.

2 Media of Revelation

Another way to distinguish between types of revelation is to distinguish the different ways in which revelation comes to us, the *media* of revelation. There are basically three types of media: *events*, *words*, and *persons*. These three categories correspond roughly to our earlier distinction between control, authority, and presence. But both these threefold distinctions are perspectives on the whole of revelation. The events of revelation not only manifest God’s control, but also his authority and presence; similarly the words and persons.

2.1 Events

God reveals himself in the events of nature and history. We learn of him from the changing seasons, from the power of nature, from the sun, moon, and stars. We also learn of him through history, the particular events that shape the fortunes of human beings. He is the one who gave to all the nations their boundaries (Acts 17:26) and brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt to possess the land of promise. In his plan, general history becomes *redemptive history*, the events by which God arranges to redeem his people from sin by the coming of Jesus.

2.2 Words

In one sense, all of God’s revelation is word-revelation, because it proceeds from God’s own speech, the Word of John 1:1–14. But sometimes God gives us word-revelation in a further

sense: revelation in which the medium is human words. But God does not leave us to figure out for ourselves what he is doing in history. He enters our experience and *speaks* to us in human words. In this way, the words of the prophets are the very words of God himself. God defines *prophet* to Moses in this way: I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I commend him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?’—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. (Deut. 18:18-22) . When a prophet or apostle writes down God’s words, the document is Holy Scripture, a document to be received as the Lord’s power, authority, and presence (2 Tim. 3:15–17, 2 Pet. 1:19–21).

2.3 Persons

Since God is a tri-personal being, his revelation is particularly vivid when it takes the form of persons. God made Adam and Eve in his image to be revelations of himself (Gen. 1:26–27). And it should not surprise us that the highest, deepest divine revelation is the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, God in person. Jesus displays his Father’s control over all things (Mark 4:41), speaks his Father’s words (John 3:34), and appears as the Father’s glorified presence with his people (Matt. 17:1-8).

3 Jesus, the Fullness of God’s Public Revelation.

According to traditional Christian teaching, Jesus Christ is the fullness of God’s revelation. There will be no further public revelation:

Christ, the Son of God made man, is the Father’s one, perfect and unsurpassable Word. In him He has said everything; there will be no other word than this one... The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive Covenant, will never pass away: and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet even if Revelation is already complete, it

has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 65-66).

The teaching on the definitive and full revelation in Christ is very often misunderstood as if we already know the whole truth and everything about God's plan of salvation. We do not know yet in any comprehensive way the mystery of Christ. It has to be gradually unfolded by the work of the Spirit who alone will lead the Church into the fullness of truth. Revelation is closed' with Christ does not mean that God is no more present and acting in history. With the resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit salvation history has already entered into a new and definitive period with the eruption of the Kingdom God into this world. God through the risen Christ and His Spirit is all the more dynamically present in the created world and in human history leading the whole creation to its final fulfillment.

In our age of pluralism and relativity of history, cultures and religions, naturally, any claim to monopoly of revelation by Christianity will be challenged. How can a single historical revelation mediate God's self-communication universally? Has not God revealed himself also to other peoples in other cultures, civilizations and religions? What about the claim made by other religions about God's revelation to them? Christian theology has not yet seriously grappled with this question. The documents of Vatican II, however, have affirmed God's presence and action in other cultures and religions:

God's presence and action, of course, means his revelation by his dynamic presence and deed. The task of theology then will be to explain the relationship of God's revelation in Christ and in other religions. Revelation is, after all, not God merely revealing a set of truths, but an existential experience of transcendence and mediation, which is universal, as God wills to save all people. God's revelation among other peoples and religions is made more explicit and definitive in His revelation in Christ. In Christ God fully revealed who and what a human person that He loves the whole humankind as His sons and daughters and that He is fully present and active in history liberate humankind from injustice, oppression, sin and finally from death. God's dynamic presence in the heart of reality and his self communication within every person and human community mean universal revelation, which is not a threat to Christian revelation. On the contrary, pluralism of religions and of revelations calls for dialogue and mutual relatedness,

searching for a community of communities or the Kingdom of God. (*Nostra Aetate*:2, *Gaudium et Spes*: 22 and *Ad Gentes*:7).

4 General/Natural and Special Revelation

A common distinction that relates to the audience (*n*) is between *general* and *special* (or *particular*) revelation, where the former refers to a revelation that is universally available, and the latter to a revelation made (directly or initially) to a limited group of people. Often, general revelation is identified with *natural revelation*, even though the latter concept has to do with the means of revelation (*k*) rather than the audience. The natural world, including human nature, is available to all, and would be the most plausible candidate as a means for a general revelation. However, it is conceivable that God could have made a general revelation by acting outside of the natural order, for example by making miracles visible to all (Helm 1982: 17). Strictly speaking, therefore, the counterpart to natural revelation—if there is a counterpart—is *supernatural* revelation rather than special revelation. “Supernatural”, in a theological context, refers to putative divine action that is not included in God’s ordinary activity of creating and sustaining the world. For the most part, however, “general revelation” and “natural revelation” are used interchangeably, as are their counterparts “special revelation” and “supernatural revelation” (for criticism of the distinction, see Downing 1964).

Some philosophers make a distinction between natural revelation and *natural theology* (e.g., King 2012; Helm 1982: 22–26; Wolterstorff 1995: 24–25). According to Helm, for something to qualify as divine revelation it must be immediate, and the human recipients must be passive. Since natural theology includes the activity of inferring knowledge of God from publicly available evidence, natural theology is not a species of natural revelation, Helm argues. It is unclear, however, why God could not reveal himself in a way that requires inferential activity on the part of the recipients, and many thinkers make no distinction between natural revelation and natural theology (Davies 2009: 36; O’Collins 2016b: 287). In the context of this entry, however, it is necessary to exclude traditional natural theology from treatment, and “natural revelation” will therefore be understood in accordance with Helm’s restrictive definition. The major focus, however, will be on special revelation.^[3]

The very idea of special revelation has often been viewed with suspicion since the Enlightenment. Why is not natural revelation enough? Why would God in addition need to

reveal himself to certain people at certain points in history? A related critique takes issue with divine hiddenness. If God exists, why does he seem to be “hidden”, so that a revelation is necessary in the first place? Since objections of this kind concern the coherence of religious outlooks based on a purported “special” revelation, it is reasonable for defenders of revelation to appeal to the doctrines of their own religious tradition. Christian thinkers have traditionally explained divine hiddenness and the need for special revelation with reference to humanity’s fall into sin. Sin has cognitive effects, and revelation is typically seen as the epistemic aspect of salvation (O’Collins 2011: 70–74). When God acts in history to save humanity, he reveals himself and what he is doing. Nevertheless, as a result of the Enlightenment critique, nineteenth century theologians started to downplay special revelation. Instead, they emphasized what could be ascertained about God on the basis of rational argument, historical enquiry, analysis of the structures of human perception or moral motivation, or any combination of these. (Quash 2007: 328)nThis “reduction” of special revelation to a vague form of general revelation, however, generated a counter-reaction in the twentieth century by theologians such as Karl Barth, who emphasized a unique divine revelation in Christ.

When it comes to the means of revelation, philosophical reflection can either consider *a priori* possibilities for how revelation might proceed, or study ideas and claims about revelation found in a particular religious tradition, such as Christianity. Perhaps it is most fruitful to combine analysis of religious claims with conceptual or metaphysical reflection in order to map the possible means of divine revelation. Using this kind of method, William Abraham has described revelation as a “polymorphous concept” like “teach” and “farm” (Abraham 1997: 206). Just like one can teach by doing a variety of different concrete things (lecturing, using pictures or models, grading papers, etc.), so God could reveal by doing many different things, such as speaking, doing “might acts” in history, causing dreams, visions or other experiences, or “making Himself present and manifesting Himself” by means of an incarnation (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* § 4).

The written record of Divine Revelation was not available to most people and it was never intended to contain all that Jesus said and did (Jn 20:25). For all these reasons, we say that the faithful looked more to the Church than to Scripture for knowledge of the truth that Jesus came to bring. 1Tim 3:15 states that, “the Church of the living God helps us to uphold the truth.” In stating this, we are not saying that the Church is more important or above Scripture. She is

not. Daily, the Church is called to listen to Sacred Scripture and be converted by it. Yet at the same time, it is her solemn duty to protect the scriptures from false and erroneous interpretations—something the great Apostle Paul was very aware of (Acts 20:28-30; 1Tim 4:1-16).

4.1 Natural Revelation

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* discusses natural revelation in the sections on “The Desire for God” (see 27–30) and “Ways of Coming to Know God” (see 31–35). In this discussion the *Catechism* describes an inwardly focused dimension of natural revelation and an outwardly focused dimension of natural revelation. Let’s look briefly at these two dimensions, knowing there is much more that could be said about them. The inward dimension of natural revelation is experienced primarily through human reflection. For example, we recognize in ourselves various hungers: the hunger for knowledge, the hunger for intimacy, the hunger for beauty, and so on. In our pursuit of these things, we often realize we are never quite satisfied—there is something more, some perfect expression of knowledge, beauty, and intimacy just out of our grasp. And in our hearts we understand that these things only reflect the absolute truth, beauty, and love that is God. Or we have this experience: We learn some great truth, create some object of great beauty, or experience deep intimacy in a relationship, and in our hearts we know these things are gifts. And we recognize that the giver of those gifts is God.

The outward expression of natural revelation is experienced in the things and creatures that make up creation. Through our intellect we see the order in creation and recognize that this order was created by God. Or we see the vastness and power in creation and recognize that something bigger and more powerful is responsible for it. Or we see the extravagant beauty and diversity present in the world’s creatures and recognize a creator who is in love with beauty and diversity. We see tenderness, compassion, and heroic sacrifice in human relationships, and we know these things are possible only because human beings are channeling the love of God.

The reality of natural revelation has been described in many ways throughout human history. The *Jesus Christ* student book and teacher guide describe natural revelation as knowing God in our daily lives, in the faith of others, through the natural world, and through human intellect. This schema is simply an alternate way to describe how natural revelation occurs. You will

notice that these descriptions still reflect both the inwardly focused dimension and the outwardly focused dimension of natural revelation discussed in the *Catechism*.

4.2 Fathers of the Church on Revelation

In general the Church Fathers did not have a highly developed theology of Revelation. They presumed the concept of natural revelation was understood by most people. This presumption arose in large part because of the influence of Greek philosophy in the Latin world. We have the earliest recorded descriptions of natural revelation as a philosophical concept from the ancient Greeks. It can be found as early as the writings of Aristotle in fourth century BC. Thus Origen, writing around AD 225, says this about natural revelation: Although no one, certainly, is able to speak worthily of God the Father, it is nevertheless possible for some knowledge of Him to be obtained by means of visible creatures and from those things which the human mind naturally senses: and it is possible, moreover, for such knowledge to be confirmed by the Sacred Scriptures. (*The Fundamental Doctrines*, 1, 3, 1).

The Fathers also emphasized that human reason could easily be led astray: hence the necessity of supernatural, or divine, Revelation. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem around AD 350 says this very clearly: In regard to the divine and holy mysteries of the faith, not the least part may be handed on without the Holy Scriptures. Do not be led astray by winning words and clever arguments. Even to me, who tell you these things, do not give ready belief, unless you receive from the Holy Scriptures the proof of the things which I announce. The salvation in which we believe is proved not from clever reasoning, but from the Holy Scriptures (*Catechetical Lectures*, 4, 17). And this excerpt from Saint Epiphanius of Salamis, written in AD 377, emphasized the complementarity of Scripture and Tradition: It is not necessary that all the divine words have an allegorical meaning. Consideration and perception is needed in order to know the meaning of the argument of each. It is needful also to make use of Tradition; for not everything can be gotten from Sacred Scripture. The holy Apostles handed down some things in the Scriptures, other things in Tradition. (*Panacea Against All Heresies*, 61, 60)

4.3 Heresies on Divine Revelation

During the past century the Church has been called on to reject as erroneous several views of Revelation irreconcilable with Catholic belief. Three of these may here be noted.

- The view of Anton Guenther (1783-1863). This writer denied that Revelation could include mysteries strictly so-called, inasmuch as the human intellect is capable of penetrating to the full all revealed truth. He taught, further, that the meaning to be attached to revealed doctrines is undergoing constant change as human knowledge grows and man's mind develops; so that the dogmatic formulæ which are now true will gradually cease to be so. His writings were put on the Index in 1857, and his erroneous propositions definitively condemned in the decrees of the Vatican Council.
- the Modernist view (Loisy, Tyrrell). According to this school, there is no such thing as Revelation in the sense of a direct communication from God to man. The human soul reaching up towards the unknowable God is ever endeavouring to interpret its sentiments in intellectual formula. The formula it thus frames are our ecclesiastical dogmas. These can but symbolize the Unknowable; they can give us no real knowledge regarding it. Such an error is manifestly subversive of all belief, and was explicitly condemned by the Decree "Lamentabili" and the Encyclical "Pascendi" (8 Sept., 1907).
- With the view just mentioned is closely connected the Pragmatist view of M. Leroy ("Dogme et Critique", Paris, 2nd ed. 1907). Like the Modernists, he sees in revealed dogmas simply the results of spiritual experience, but holds their value to lie not in the fact that they symbolize the Unknowable, but that they have practical value in pointing the way by which we may best enjoy experience of the Divine. This view was condemned in the same documents as the last mentioned.

5. The Possibility of Revelation

The possibility of Revelation as above explained has been strenuously denied from various points of view during the last century. For this reason the Church held it necessary to issue special decrees on the subject in the Vatican Council. Its antagonists may be divided into two classes according to the different standpoints from which they direct their attack, viz:

- *Rationalists* (under this class we include both Deist and Agnostic writers). Those who adopt this standpoint rely in the main on two fundamental objections: they either urge that the miraculous is impossible, and that Revelation involves miraculous interposition

on the part of the Deity; or they appeal to the autonomy of reason, which it is maintained can only accept as truths the results of its own activities.

- *Immanentists.* To this class may be assigned all those whose objections are based on Kantian and Hegelian doctrines as to the subjective character of all our knowledge. The views of these writers frequently involve a purely pantheistic doctrine. But even those who repudiate pantheism, in place of the personal God, Ruler, and Judge of the world, whom Christianity teaches, substitute the vague notion of the "Spirit" immanent in all men, and regard all religious creeds as the attempts of the human soul to find expression for its inward experience. Hence no religion, whether pagan or Christian, is wholly false; but none can claim to be a message from God free from any admixture of error. (Cf. Sabatier, "Esquisse", etc., Bk. I, cap. ii.) Here too the autonomy of reason is invoked as fatal to the doctrine of Revelation properly so called. In the face of these objections, it is evident that the question of the possibility of Revelation is at present one of the most vital portions of Christian apologetic.

If the existence of a personal God be once established, the physical possibility at least of Revelation is undeniable. God, who has endowed man with means to communicate his thoughts to his fellows, cannot be destitute of the power to communicate His own thoughts to us. [Martineau, it is true, denies that we possess faculties either to receive or to authenticate a divine revelation concerning the past or the future (Seat of Authority in Religion, p. 311); but such an assertion is arbitrary and extravagant in the extreme.] However, numerous difficulties have been urged on grounds other than that of physical possibility. In estimating their value it seems desirable to distinguish three aspects of Revelation, viz: as it makes known to us;

- (1) Truths of the natural law,
- (2) mysteries of the faith,
- (3) positive precepts, e.g. regarding Divine worship.

(1) The revelation of truths of the natural law is certainly not inconsistent with God's wisdom. God so created man as to bestow on him endowments amply sufficient for him to attain his last end. Had it been otherwise, the creation would have been imperfect. If over and above this He decreed to make the attainment of beatitude yet easier for man by placing within his reach a far simpler and far more certain way of knowing the law on the observance of

which his fate depended, this is an argument for the Divine generosity; it does not disprove the Divine wisdom. To assume, with certain Rationalists, that exceptional intervention can only be explained on the ground that God was unable to embrace His ultimate design in His original scheme is a mere *petitio principii*. Further, the doctrine of original sin supplies an additional reason for such a revelation of the natural law. That doctrine teaches us that man by the abuse of his free will has rendered his attainment of salvation difficult. Though his intellectual faculties are not radically vitiated, yet his grasp of truth is weakened; his recognition of the moral law is constantly clouded by doubts and questionings. Revelation gives to his mind the certainty he had lost, and so far repairs the evils consequent on the catastrophe which had befallen him.

(2) Still more difficulty has been felt regarding mysteries. It is freely asserted that a mystery is something repugnant to reason, and therefore something intrinsically impossible. This objection rests on a mere misunderstanding of what is signified by a mystery. In theological terminology a conception involves a mystery when it is such that the natural faculties of the mind are unable to see how its elements can coalesce. This does not imply anything contrary to reason. A conception is only contrary to reason when the mind can recognize that its elements are mutually exclusive, and therefore involve a contradiction in terms. A more subtle objection is that urged by Dr. J. Caird, to the effect that every truth that can be partially communicated to the mind by analogies is ultimately capable of being fully grasped by the understanding. "Of all such representations, unless they are purely illusory, it must hold good that implicitly and in undeveloped form they contain rational thought and therefore thought which human intelligence may ultimately free from its sensuous veil. . . . Nothing that is absolutely inscrutable to reason can be made known to faith" (Philosophy of Religion, p. 71). The objection rests on a wholly exaggerated view regarding the powers of the human intellect. The cognitive faculty of any nature is proportionate to its grade in the scale of being. The intelligence of a finite intellect can only penetrate a finite object; it is incapable of comprehending the Infinite. The finite types through which the Infinite is made known to it can never under any circumstances lead to more than analogous knowledge. It is further frequently urged that the revelation of what the mind cannot understand would be an act of violence to the intellect; and that this faculty can only accept those truths whose intrinsic reasonableness it recognizes. This assertion, based on the alleged autonomy of reason, can only be met with denial. The function of the intellect is to recognize and admit any truth which is adequately presented to it, whether that truth be

guaranteed by internal or by external criteria. The reason is not deprived of its legitimate activity because the criteria are external. It finds ample scope in weighing the arguments for the credibility of the fact asserted. The existence of mysteries in the Christian religion was expressly taught by the Vatican Council (*De Fide Cath.*, cap. ii, can. ii). "If anyone shall say that no mysteries properly so called are contained in the Divine revelation, but that all the dogmas of the faith can be understood and proved from natural principles by human reason duly cultivated — let him be anathema."

(3) The older (Deist) School of Rationalists denied the possibility of a Divine revelation imposing any laws other than those which natural religion enjoins on man. These writers regarded natural religion as, so to speak, a political constitution determining the Divine government of the universe, and held that God could only act as its terms prescribed. This error likewise was proscribed at the same time (*De Fide Cath.*, cap. ii, can. ii). "If any one shall say that it is impossible or that it is inexpedient that man should be instructed regarding God and the worship to be paid to Him by Divine revelation — let him be anathema."

It can hardly be questioned that the "autonomy of reasons" furnishes the main source of the difficulties at present felt against Revelation in the Christian sense. It seems desirable to indicate very briefly the various ways in which that principle is understood. It is explained by M. Blondel, an eminent member of the Immanentist School, as signifying that "nothing can enter into a man which does not proceed from him, and which does not correspond in some manner to an interior need of expansion; and that neither in the sphere of historic facts nor of traditional doctrine, nor of commands imposed by authority, can any truth rank as valid for a man or any precept as obligatory, unless it be in some way autonomous and autochthonous" (*Lettre sur les exigences*, etc., p. 601). Although M. Blondel has in his own case reconciled this principle with the acceptance of Catholic belief, yet it may readily be seen that it affords an easy ground for the denial not merely of the possibility of external Revelation, but of the whole historic basis of Christianity.

The origin of this erroneous doctrine is to be found in the fact that within the sphere of the natural speculative reason, truths which are received purely on external authority, and which are in no way connected with principles already admitted, can scarcely be said to form part of our knowledge. Science asks for the inner reason of things and can make no use of truths save in

so far as it can reach the principles from which they flow. The extension of this to religious truths is an error directly traceable to the assumption of the eighteenth-century philosophers that there are no religious truths save those which the human intellect can attain unaided. The principle is, however, sometimes applied with a less extensive signification. It may be understood to involve no more than that reason cannot be compelled to admit any religious doctrine or any moral obligation merely because they possess extrinsic guarantees of truth; they must in every case be able to justify their validity on intrinsic grounds. Thus Prof. J. Caird writes: "Neither moral nor religious ideas can be simply transferred to the human spirit in the form of fact, nor can they be verified by any evidence outside of or lower than themselves" (*Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, p. 31). A somewhat different meaning again is implied in the canon of the Vatican Council in which the right of the intellect to claim absolute independence (autonomy) is denied. "If anyone shall say that human reason is independent in such wise that faith cannot be commanded it by God — let him be anathema" (*De Fide Cath.*, cap. iii, can. i). This canon is directed against the position maintained as already noted by the older Rationalists and the Deists, that human reason is amply sufficient without exterior assistance to attain to absolute truth in all matters of religion (cf. Vacant, "*Etudes Théologiques*", I, 572; II, 387).

6 Necessity of Revelation

Can it be said that Revelation is necessary to man? There can be no question as to its necessity, if it be admitted that God destines man to attain a supernatural beatitude which surpasses the exigencies of his natural endowments. In that case God must needs reveal alike the existence of that supernatural end and the means by which we are to attain it. But is Revelation necessary even in order that man should observe the precepts of the natural law? If our race be viewed in its present condition as history displays it, the answer can only be that it is, morally speaking, impossible for men unassisted by Revelation, to attain by their natural powers such a knowledge of that law as is sufficient to the right ordering of life. In other words, Revelation is morally necessary. Absolute necessity we do not assert. Man, Catholic theology teaches, possesses the requisite faculties to discover the natural law. Luther indeed asserted that man's intellect had become hopelessly obscured by original sin, so that even natural truth was beyond his reach. And the Traditionalists of the nineteenth century

(Bautain, Bonnetty, etc.) also fell into error, teaching that man was incapable of arriving at moral and religious truth apart from Revelation. The Church, on the contrary, recognizes the capacity of human reason and grants that here and there pagans may have existed, who had freed themselves from prevalent errors, and who had attained to such a knowledge of the natural law as would suffice to guide them to the attainment of beatitude. But she teaches nevertheless that this can only be the case as regards a few, and that for the bulk of mankind Revelation is necessary. That this is so may be shown both from the facts of history and from the nature of the case. As regards the testimony of history, it is notorious that even the most civilized of pagan races have fallen into the grossest errors regarding the natural law; and from these it may safely be asserted they would never have emerged.

Certainly the schools of philosophy would not have enabled them to do so; for many of these denied even such fundamental principles of the natural law as the personality of God and the freedom of the will. Again, by the very nature of the case, the difficulties involved in the attainment of the requisite knowledge are insuperable. For men to be able to attain such a knowledge of the natural law as will enable them to order their lives rightly, the truths of that law must be so plain that the mass of men can discover them without long delay, and possess a knowledge of them which will be alike free from uncertainty and secure from serious error. No reasonable man will maintain that in the case of the greater part of mankind this is possible. Even the most vital truths are called in question and are met by serious objections. The separation of truth from error is a work involving time and labour. For this the majority of men have neither inclination nor opportunity. Apart from the security which Revelation gives they would reject an obligation both irksome and uncertain. It results that a revelation even of the natural law is for man in his present state a moral necessity.

7 Faith—Response to Divine Revelation

Paul Tillich, the famous Protestant theologian, in his book, *Dynamics of Faith* (1958) defined faith as ‘ultimate concern, the state of being ultimately concerned. We are concerned with so many things, physical health, food, occupation, family, friends, spiritual goods etc. But what proceeds from the centre of our being and what absorbs the energy of our whole heart and mind may be called ‘ultimate concern.

Faith is first of all, a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed. We exercise natural faith many times every day. We believe the food we eat will not poison us. We trust that the buildings we enter will not fall down. Supernatural faith is the name Christians give to our response to the God who reveals himself to us. It is a gift of God usually given to us through prayer, the sacraments and other faith-filled people.

Christianity began with the Abba experience of Jesus Christ and the experience of the disciples of Jesus who found in Jesus their God and Savior. This faith experience presupposes God's revelation in Jesus Christ directed towards humankind in view of human salvation. Thus Faith and Revelation, though they are distinct, cannot be separated. Revelation is God's self-communication, which can be realized or terminated only when it is received and responded to by human persons in faith. Hence Faith and Revelation are two sides of the same process, and they are the foundations of theology.

7.1 Faith as a relationship with God

The Bible is full of examples of people making a faith response to God's Revelation of himself. When God revealed himself to Abraham and called him to leave his country, we are told Abraham went as God had told him (Gen 12:1-4). When the angel Gabriel came to Mary and invited her to be the Mother of the Messiah, she responded: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). As God makes himself known to us, we have the opportunity to say 'yes' to God and enter into a personal faith relationship with him, or we can ignore his outreach to us. As we grow in faith, we are, with the grace of God, able to entrust our whole lives, body, mind and spirit to God trusting that no matter what happens to us, all will be okay because he will be with us. So when the Catechism states that faith is, first of all, our "personal adherence to God," it means that we respond to God by submitting and committing our lives to him, recognizing that he is the Source of our being, the One who daily sustains us in being and the One who is the final goal of our lives.

7.2 Faith Engagement with the Message of Divine Revelation

The Catechism tells us that "faith also involves giving free assent to all that God has revealed" (C150). In other words, we say 'yes' not only to God but also to the truth or message

that he has revealed—the truth which we see above is given to us in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, and protected for us through the Church’s Magisterium. Needless to say, coming to a point of total faith in God, total surrender to him and his ways, and total adherence to his revealed truth, is a lifelong journey demanding tremendous cooperation with God’s grace.

7.3 Other Characteristics of Faith

The Catechism names ten aspects of Christian faith (C150-175). We will look briefly at most of them, often joining two of them together. Faith is both personal (“I believe...”) and communal (“We believe...”). We are called to give God a ‘personal yes’ like Abraham and Mary, and also called to give him a ‘communal yes’—faith shared as a member of the Body of Christ. The latter is sometimes called “ecclesial faith.” Faith is both a gift of God (grace) and a free human act. We only come to faith as a result of God’s initiative and nudging. Yet God will not force us to believe. We must freely choose God, just as spouses must freely choose each other. Faith seeking understanding. “Faith seeking understanding” is the classic definition of theology. The person of faith seeks to understand what he/she believes. Aided by grace, the Holy Spirit, gifted teachers, prayer, and personal study, we grow in our understanding of God and his truth. One of the exciting developments in our Church in recent years is that more and more Catholics are joining faith formation programs. As a result, they are growing in their understanding and appreciation of their Catholic faith, and also in their ability to see and respond to God in all aspects of their lives. The Catechism also speaks about the necessity of faith for salvation, the importance of nourishing our faith with Scripture, works of charity and justice, and participation in the life of the Church. Finally, faith gives us a taste of the life that is to come.

8 The Dogmatic Constitution of Vat II on Divine Revelation

8.1. Historical Context

The document *Dei Verbum* (Word of God) is one of only two dogmatic constitutions issued by the Second Vatican Council, the other being *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. As such *Dei Verbum* (henceforth DV) is one of the most authoritative and important documents of the Council. Its purpose is to spell out the Church’s understanding of the nature of revelation, that is, the process whereby God communicates with human beings. As such it touches on questions about Scripture, tradition and the teaching

authority of the Church. The remote context of this document is the emergence of historical consciousness in the 18th and 19th centuries and the impact that this had on the understanding of the Scriptures. Historians began to adopt new more historical ways of reading the Bible, and this had flow-on effects into the whole understanding of both the Bible and Church tradition.

At the end of the 19th century a movement arose, called Modernism, which sought to accommodate the Church to some of these new understandings. While this movement went too far in seeking to relativise tradition and Church authority and was thus condemned by the Church, the impact of historical consciousness itself could not be suppressed. In his groundbreaking encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), Pius XII gave permission to Catholic scripture scholars to adopt new ways of reading the scriptures which were more congruent with these new historical methods. Nonetheless there remained general suspicion about these methods, and those scholars which adopted them continued to suffer from accusations and recriminations. The work of the Second Vatican Council brought new developments. With the calling of the Council it was clear that any document on the topic of revelation would be the place where this battle would be fought out. As was the accepted process a preparatory commission, under the direction of Cardinal Ottaviani, put together a draft document which was meant to form the starting point for the discussions of the Council. This first draft was largely shaped by debates going back to the Reformation, and spoke of two sources of revelation, Scripture and Tradition. Further it continued to treat the Bible in an unhistorical manner, not in the manner congruent with historically conscious approaches. Finally it contained various condemnations and warnings which were not in line with the more pastoral approach desired by Pope John XXIII. Although this draft was opposed by the majority of the bishops, the vote did not achieve the two thirds majority needed to reject it altogether. At this point Pope John personally intervened and had the document withdrawn and completely redrafted. This action of Pope John represented a major shift in the processes of the Council. It lessened the power of the preparatory commissions which were dominated by theologians who were unfamiliar with and suspicious of the type of historical methodologies which were being introduced into the study of theology. It gave the bishops more room to move in relation to other preparatory documents which reflected similar limitations. In its final form, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 18 November 1965, *Dei Verbum* continues the trajectory initiated by *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, allowing Catholic scripture scholars to read the Bible as arising within particular social and

cultural contexts. It places this insight, however, 1 within a larger framework of divine revelation and the role of the Church's teaching authority. As such it needs to be read in the context of *Lumen Gentium* (LG), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, particularly those parts on the teaching authority of the Church.

8.2. Overview of the Document

After a brief prologue, the document has six major chapters: 1. Divine Revelation Itself 2. The Transmission of Divine Revelation 3. Sacred Scripture: Its Divine Inspiration and Its Interpretation 4. The Old Testament 5. The New Testament 6. Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church As is clear from this structure, the major concern of the document is to proclaim a Catholic understanding of the Bible as the "word of God". This understanding is placed within the larger context of the Church's understanding of revelation itself. Here the document speaks not of revelation about God, but the revelation of God – "It pleased God in his goodness and wisdom to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will" (n.2, see also n.6)). Theologians will pick up this theme and speak of revelation as "divine self-communication", that is, God communicates his very self to us, making us "sharers in the divine nature" (n.2). The document places revelation in the context of God's saving will operating in history, or "salvation history". Both the inner Word of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit play a role in revelation, which thus has a Trinitarian structure. These are all significant theological advances on previous Church documents. The second chapter deals with the relationship between Scripture and Tradition in the context of the transmission of revelation within the Church. The role of the apostles and their successors the bishops is highlighted. Most significant here is the close relationship that the document identifies between Scripture and Tradition. Rather than positing two sources of revelation, as had earlier been the case, it speaks of one "divine wellspring" (n.9) making up a single "deposit of faith" entrusted to the Church (n.10). The authentic interpretation of the word of God is entrusted to the teaching office of the Church, which is not "above the word of God, but serves it" (n.10). The third chapter contains the basic principles whereby Catholic scripture scholars should approach the Bible. Thus it continues the teaching of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* by encouraging scholars to read the Bible within its historical context. While it is true that God speaks through the Bible, the human authors remain "true authors", not just secretaries taking dictation from God. God speaks through them "in human

fashion”. So in order to understand the biblical text it is necessary to pay attention to the “literary forms” of the text, for example whether it is historical, or poetic or prophetic.

We must understand the “customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative” (n.12) of the authors if we are not to misunderstand what the author intends to convey. The chapters on the Old and New Testament place these books within the history of salvation that lies at the core of these collections. For the Church the New Testament is hidden in the Old Testament, and the true meaning of the Old Testament is made manifest in the New Testament. A special place is held by the Gospels, with the Church maintaining their apostolic origin and historical intent. Nonetheless, in line with modern historical approaches, the document recognises that the Gospels are not diaries of Jesus’ life, but are mediated through the interests of the Church of the time (n.19).³ The final chapter places Scripture in the life of the Church. In a way that would have surprised many Catholics the Council taught that the “Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the [eucharistic] Body of the Lord” (n.21). The document encouraged Catholics to read the Bible and in particular urged theologians and priests to become more thoroughly formed by the Bible. Quoting St Jerome, an early biblical scholar and translator of the Bible, it reminds us that “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”.

8.3. Key points and Quotations from D.V.

Revelation has a Trinitarian structure and is manifest in history In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). ... This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation. (n.2) Revelation is a divine self-communication Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, He

chose to share with them those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind. (n.6)

There is one source of revelation, God, with two modes of transmission Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence. (n.9)

The Magisterium (teaching office of the Church) is the servant of the word This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed. (n.10) The human authors of Scripture are true authors In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted (n.11) .

The scriptures are inspired. Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation. (n.11) 5 Interpretation requires attention to the literary forms of the text ... the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to

"literary forms." For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. (n.12)

There is an intrinsic relationship between Old and New Testaments God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New. For, though Christ established the new covenant in His blood (see Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), still the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament (see Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27; Rom. 16:25-26; 2 Cor. 14:16) and in turn shed light on it and explain it. (n.16) The Church maintains that the Gospels are of apostolic origin The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what the Apostles preached in fulfillment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of faith, namely, the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. (n.18) The Church upholds the historicity of the Gospels Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven (see Acts 1:1). (n.19) The role of the Church in the writing of the Gospels The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches and preserving the form of proclamation but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus. (n.19)

The Church venerates the Bible The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body. She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith, since, as inspired by God and committed once and for all

to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles. (n.21) 6 Theology finds its foundation in the Scriptures Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word. For the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and since they are inspired really are the word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology. (n.24).

8.4 Summary of the key points made by *Dei Verbum*:

1. Revelation is God's self-communication, a freely given and loving invitation into a relationship of friendship and communion with the Holy Trinity; to actually share in the divine nature. This self-revelation has a content that is summarized as the "deposit of faith" (2, 10).
2. The divine self-revelation is centered on and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is both the revealer and the revealed (2, 4).
3. The Revelation in Christ reaches its full climax not in his Incarnation but in the Paschal Mystery: his Passion, death, and Resurrection (4).
4. Revelation calls each human person to respond in faith to God's invitation to be in friendship with him. This response is not just intellectual; it is a response of the whole person (5).
5. Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church are intrinsically linked, so that one cannot stand without the others (10).

9 Catholic Theology of Revelation since Vatican II:

Contemporary Catholic theology of revelation enjoys the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) as its touchstone. As a youthful theological advisor to Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne, Joseph Ratzinger played a major role in formulating the majority response to the preparatory Theological Commission's Schema Constitutionis dogmaticae de fontibus Revelationis. Ratzinger later described this Schema as "a canonization of Roman school theology," and his summary of its contents identifies the central challenges facing the doctrine of revelation today. "All the relevant questions were decided in a purely defensive spirit: the greater extent of tradition in comparison with Scripture, a largely verbalistic conception of the idea of inspiration, the narrowest interpretation of inerrancy ('in qualibet re religiose vel profana'), a conception of the historicity of the Gospels that suggested that there were no problems etc." In the view of

Ratzinger and others, the Schema's approach largely ignored the crucial historical questions that needed answering. Ratzinger thought that had the Council Fathers accepted the Schema, they would have been shutting down the effort to address the Enlightenment's historical challenges. What were these historical challenges? As Ratzinger says, the main one was that "the sacred books, believed to be the work of a very few authors to whom God had directly dictated his words, suddenly appeared as a work expressive of an entire human history, which had grown layer by layer throughout millennia, a history deeply interwoven with the religious history of surrounding peoples." A similar situation held for the Church's tradition and development of doctrine: "Liturgical forms and customs, dogmatic formulations thought to have arisen with the apostles, now appeared as products of complicated processes of growth within the womb of history. And the very human factors in this growth were becoming increasingly evident."

Conclusion

It is true that Christianity does not deal with a revelation, which is general, universal and existential experience of transcendence, but with the concrete historical revelation in Jesus Christ, which is mediated by the Church. But a universal existential experience of transcendence is the basis of historical revelation, and at the same time, historical revelation reaches human persons through the subjective existential experience. Hence historical revelation and subjective experience have to be related in their polarity.

As social beings all of us belong to a society and community. We receive many things from the community. Revelation, more precisely historical revelation, is not given to each person directly by God, but we receive it in and through the community. Every religious experience here in our case, faith and revelation, is mediated to us in and by the community through signs and symbols, objects, events and persons. Christian revelation is, above all, a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, not simply some knowledge, wisdom, or cognitive truths. It is an experience of its own kind with a holistic character, which is totally engaging one's whole person, not only one's intellect and will.

Revelation is thus a very complex reality and so is its concept. It has various components, which are often singled out and emphasized, and thus various models of revelation are presented. Revelation as *doctrine* is one model. Here the cognitive contents of revelation as propositions or deposit of truth are understood as revelation. They are either contained in the Sacred Scripture or passed on as tradition by the living Magisterium of the Church. Another model conceives revelation as the *presence* within the believer as a personal encounter with God. It is not a mere communication of some knowledge, but the presence of the living and life-giving God. A third

model conceives revelation as experience, the personal existential experience, which is universal and possible for all human persons. Revelation as history is a fourth model. It is not merely an event, which takes place in the inner subjectivity of the human person, rather it is an event of history, a universal and public historical event that can be historically established by its analysis and interpreted as an act of God in human history. These models do not exclude each other; rather they must be interrelated. All these aspects constitute the different dimensions of revelation. Revelation experience is distinct from its expressions, interpretations and conceptualization. For example, what we have in the New Testament is not revelation as such; it is the expressions and interpretations of the original revelation experience of the Apostles and Disciples of Christ.