

CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION

In faith, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, love. (St. Augustine)

The substance of the ancient doctrines of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. (Opening address of John XXIII to Vatican II)

The business of theology is not to solve problems, but to illumine mysteries that become all the more mysterious when so illumined. (Michael Dodds O.P.)

It is rather unnerving and somewhat presumptuous to set out in a few pages theological assumptions and concepts that have been the objects of scholarly investigations for centuries. However, if we who are not professional theologians are determined to do a little theology, we need to confront the “jargon” of theology and attempt to understand the terms as best we can. What follows is an outline of some thoughts concerning a few of these fundamental “terms”.

Before we proceed further, a word of caution. The following chapters are an attempt to outline some basic theological insights relative to our Catholic faith. However, we should keep in mind that the work of theologians should not be taken too seriously. Not that theology is not important, it is important, but by definition (as we shall see later) it is always incomplete and provisional, always in need of revision and reinterpretation. While science may look for a “final unified theory” there is no final theology. Theology is the human reflection on the revelation of God and the God who reveals can never be adequately expressed in human words or concepts. God is the ultimate mystery.

Currently theology is in need of a major revision to come to terms with the discoveries of modern science e.g., relativity theory, chaos theory, genetics and the role of chance, struggle and blind natural selection presented by Darwin. Theology and true science should never conflict, they are both proper methods of understanding reality. However, theology must address the “religion” of scientific reductionism (scientism), which, by an act of scientific “faith”, attempts to reduce all reality to impersonal matter, to the exclusion of a personal God. Theology, for its part, must respond by finding new ways to express the classic notions of a personal, caring, all powerful God who creates and sustains us.

Our task is to attempt to make some human, fallible sense of what we believe within the context of our historical situation. Whether at the professional or nonprofessional level this task is called theology. It is, of course, possible to have authentic faith and not be adept at theology. A life of compassion, forgiveness and generosity demonstrates more “knowledge” of the Lord, than the ability to describe in detail the Christological controversies of the early Church and recite the Nicene Creed from memory. A person may confess that “Jesus is Lord”, but Jesus made it clear that only those who look for Him in others, especially the poor, the sick, the needy and the oppressed, will find Him.

Jesus taught us that, in the end, it is not what we think that counts, but whom we love. In the parable of the Sheep and Goats Jesus tells us that it is possible to encounter and respond in love to Him without even knowing it and thereby be invited into the Kingdom.

And so it seems clear that while theology is important it is not the most important thing we are called to do. The most important thing we Christians are called to do is to follow Jesus. So what does this mean in the moments of our ordinary lives? In the language of Jesus it is committing ourselves to make the Kingdom of God present in our world. Now what does this mean? Is this some special “religious” activity apart from our daily routine? Not at all. Simply put, it is putting aside our overt selfishness and dedicating ourselves to do all we can to bring justice and peace to our corner of the world, to become what we were created to be -- the family of God.

Again, what does this look like? In our daily lives it takes the form of loving service to our family, friends, strangers and the world. It is when we are at our best -- forgiving, encouraging, accepting, listening, being patient, bringing laughter and joy, weeping with those who weep, working for justice and peace, playing with our kids, sharing food and drink, working for our families, celebrating life, giving praise and thanksgiving to God, caring for the sick, poor, dying and homeless, willing to suffer for what is right -- in other words, following Jesus. This is making the Kingdom present. This is what Jesus preached and lived. *Again, in the final analysis, we are identified as followers of Jesus not by the correctness of our theology, but by the love in our hearts.*

Having said this, it is well to heed this warning from Richard McBrien:

...Theology cannot argue for the elimination of creeds and other specific formulations of faith. Such a proposal would be an overreaction to the intellectualist misconception of revelation and faith. It is true, of course, that Christianity is a way of life, but it will soon lose its identity if its ethic becomes separated from its doctrine” (Do We Need the Church? p. 191).

And so the theological enterprise that has formulated our scriptures, creeds, doctrines and dogmas is still important for us, lest we become separated from the ground of our Christian ethic i.e, God present to us in the historical Jesus. Christianity cannot be totally defined as a moral system as it is in Buddhism. Christianity is based on an act of faith in a God revealed to us in human history, especially in Jesus. This God not only calls us to a way of life, but also, and importantly, gives us a vision of the structure and meaning of the universe through which we can glimpse His shadow and understand ourselves.

It is also true that theology can play a very important role in the lives of us who struggle to make “some sense” out of our faith and strive to relate it to our ordinary lives, which include the various modern scientific and philosophical views of reality. If the theology presented to us in the past has made belief difficult in our modern world, then we must untie the theological knot and give new expression to our faith so that we can again believe. If it is true, as Vatican II noted, that the bad example of Christians has contributed greatly to the phenomenon of atheism in our world, it is no doubt also true

that bad theology has made a significant contribution to the phenomenon of believers who no longer are able to believe.

PROCEDURE

Assumptions - In approaching theology, it is important to remember that most, but certainly not all, theology is based on certain assumptions e.g. God is real, God communicates with us. These are fundamental assumptions and, with good reasons, not shared by all of our fellow human beings. There are, indeed, important challenges to the assumption that the God of Christianity exists (the problem of evil) and communicates with us (the silence of God). However, I hold in faith that God is real, in fact the ground of all reality and the ultimate goal of human history, and that communication from God, albeit symbolic and analogous, takes place in a multitude of ways. These are my assumptions and they are the basis for what follows.

It is the purpose of this rather long introduction to try to clarify some of these assumptions and attempt to shed light on a few of the most important theological terms, especially as they appear in the Roman Catholic tradition, so that theological statements or conclusions based on these assumptions and using these terms will be more understandable.

Method - The method is to pick, choose and summarize several theological positions from the literature generated since The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and on a limited basis to actually “do a little theology” of our own. These selected theological positions were chosen because they present reformulated theological concepts, avoiding some of the traditional theological formulations which have lost their power to communicate the faith. Or put another way, these reformulated concepts present the substance of the ancient faith in a way which will be helpful to ordinary people as we try to understand and live out our Catholic faith in our present culture. It is part of the necessary process of “inculturation” described in the Preface.

Certainly anyone trying to theologize within the Roman Catholic Tradition must attend to the tension of the past and the present. To simply repeat the formulations of the past is clearly irresponsible, however, to completely ignore the past is equally irresponsible. The task is to reformulate the ancient faith within certain “orthodox parameters” of the past while attending to our developing consciousness of the mystery of God in our lives and how we express this in new language and new concepts that have meaning to us in our present culture.

For example, one ancient “orthodox parameter” is to refer to God as “Three Persons in one God”. This formula came from the Council of Nicea in 325 AD and the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD. This formula, without explaining much, set the limits, i.e., the parameters, for an exploration of the mystery of the triune God down to the present day. And yet, the Greek notion of “person” used by 4th century theologians is not the same notion of “person” that we use today. In modern terms the word person usually designates a center of consciousness, however, the Fathers of Nicea did not intend to

teach that there are three centers of consciousness in the Triune Godhead, nor would we teach that today.

Our task is to take a new look at old formulations of our faith and be prepared to accept changes, often dramatic changes in the ways we explain what we believe. Happily some of this has happened. For example, we have come a long way from the dictum that “error has no rights” and the spectacle of the Inquisition burning heretics at the stake. We now admit in the documents of Vatican II that even the Church itself has not always been free from error and declare religious liberty to be a fundamental right based on the dignity of each human being. This is a new insight into the nature and mission of the Church.

And so to be a worthy messenger of the gospel in the present age, anyone who theologizes must first consider the normative experience of Jesus related by the first Christians in the New Testament. Next we have the witness of the Fathers of the Church e.g. Augustine and Irenaeus, and the teaching of the various Ecumenical Councils plus great theologians e.g. St. Thomas and mystics e.g. St. John of the Cross. All these witnesses of the past provide a valuable and necessary point of reference. However, we are all searching for God and that task is unending. No one has spoken the last word and each word spoken has been within a particular cultural context with its special language, thought patterns, symbols, modes of expression, philosophical outlook, scientific assumptions and so forth. Christians in every age are called to discover anew the meaning of the ancient faith.

A GENERAL THEME

In order to give some continuity to this presentation, starting with Chapter 2, I will try to develop a rather simple theological understanding of the term *salvation* and to show how this understanding of salvation is found in OT history, OT theology, in the NT (in Jesus), in the mission and teaching authority of the Church and in the sacraments. More importantly, there will also be an attempt to see how this understanding of salvation can help us see ourselves, others, the world and God in new ways that relate to our ordinary life experiences and also provide a clearer sense of direction for our moral decisions.

Note: I must confess that most, if not all, of the ideas in this work were borrowed, or simply stolen over a period of thirty years from authors, many of whom I do not even remember. I preserved them because they made sense to me and helped in understanding my faith, my world and my life. Some authors I do remember and will note them when appropriate. In the Suggested Readings, I will attempt to list certain books I found helpful and for the most part can be found in my own small library. If you read them, you can unerringly retrace the footsteps of my "theological journey", such as it is. I have tried to solve the he/she dilemma by using “we” whenever possible, where this has failed, I apologize. I have also signified God by a male pronoun for which I claim no rational basis except scripture and tradition.

THE GREAT QUESTIONS - As we grow up, at some point in time we become aware of our unique ability to be reflective. We become conscious in a new way of our own

existence and the existence of the world around us. However, these realities come into our consciousness only partially understood. It is our common experience that we never come to know ourselves fully, nor can we ever fully understand others, even those we know and love the most. And as scientists struggle to understand the nature of our world and the universe around us, it seems that for every question answered, others spring up to take its place.

Recently an astronomer friend of mine told me that the current best guess is that the universe contains an estimated one million stars for every grain of sand on the earth and when I asked my locker mate at the university gym to give me a five minute explanation of the Quantum Theory, he briefly described for me a world of subatomic particles - quarks, charms, mesons - populating an unseen world of inner space and indeterminacy beyond the world of everyday experience and certainly beyond my imagination or comprehension. And so, for us lowly mortals, the realities of self, others and the world around us, for the most part, present themselves as a great mystery.

Confronted with this mystery, in our more reflective moments, we ask "The Great Questions": Why is there something rather than nothing? Where did it all come from? What is the meaning, if any, of the universe? What is my place in the universe? Who am I? Does it make any real difference how I act? What is the meaning of my life? What is the meaning of my death? Is there life after death? Why is there evil and suffering? Is there really a God? What do I mean by the word "God"?

THE BIRTH OF THEOLOGY - We who are people of faith believe that our quest for answers to "The Great Questions" is met by an "answer". An answer which is given from beyond ourselves. An answer that "breaks in" to our human consciousness and helps us to understand ourselves, others and all reality in a new way. An answer that is not of our own making, but comes as a gift, a grace initiated by an Other, whom we call God. This grace, this answer, is none other than God's self-revelation in human history.

For example, we Christians believe that God "broke in" to the life of Moses in a profound religious experience (the burning bush) and in some, perhaps primitive way, revealed Himself as one who cares for people and wishes to save them by gathering them together as a people and relating to them in a covenant of love, as a father to His children. We Christians also believe that God "broke in" to history in the person of Jesus. We believe that the eternal Word of God became flesh and lived among us. We believe that, within His own person, He overcame sin and death and revealed that our destiny is to be one with Him, sharing his victory over sin and death. This is our faith.

Our faith can express itself in a number of ways. Faith can evoke prayer and adoration. Faith can express itself in loving service to others and the earth. Faith can also express itself in words, in statements of belief. And it is when we try to put it into words and make some sense of our faith, that theology is born. Theology is nothing more than the articulation of our experience of God in our lives. So, whenever any of us speak about what we believe about God, we become theologians. And from this theologizing emerge our individual formulations of belief, which help make intellectual sense of our faith and

give meaning to the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of our lives, e.g., how we understand God as creator makes a great difference in how we understand pain and suffering, especially the suffering of the innocent.

Theological study, based on faith, demands more of a personal commitment than say the study of science or history. This is so because the “Great Questions” mentioned above are about the fundamental nature of our existence, the meaning of our lives, our ultimate concerns. To theologize in a purely objective way makes it difficult, if not impossible, to relate our study to our ordinary life experiences. Faith is lived, not simply thought about.

However, personal commitment to one’s faith without a spirit of open inquiry - an expectation of finding something new - can be tragic. As Ian Barbour notes: “Commitment without inquiry tends toward fanaticism or narrow dogmatism” (*Religion and Science* p.135). We in the Catholic tradition have not totally escaped this tragic situation. Our theological search must be a true search. We must expect the unexpected.

It is also important to remember that our theologizing never occurs in a vacuum. Our faith comes to us in and through a community of believers. Those before us have tried to express their faith in ways that made sense to them. They in turn have passed on the results of their theologizing to us in the Scriptures, official Church pronouncements, in opinions of theologians and most importantly through our families, local schools and churches. In 1968, when I was a priest, I gave a lecture on abortion to students at Ft. Hays College. To my surprise, in the question and answer period a student asked me why I was a Catholic. The only thing I could think of to say was that it was because I had been born and raised a Catholic. It’s still my best answer.

Most of us spend very little time theologizing, especially in a formal way. The majority of our beliefs we have received from others and we accept them or reject them for a variety of reasons, often without careful examination. But there comes a time in the life of most of us when we do make an attempt to understand our faith better. This may happen in times of tragedy, when we are confronted with the presence of evil in a world created by a God whom we profess to be all loving and all powerful; or maybe a friend is questioning their belief and asks our assistance; or perhaps we come to a time on our life when we sit back, examine our current system of beliefs and ask ourselves what we really do believe about the great mysteries of life. In these instances we begin to theologize.

DOING THEOLOGY - Whenever we attempt to take a critical look at the faith that was handed to us by our families and our Church, we begin a theological journey of sorts. And as we attempt to do theology in a more or less rational, more or less scientific way, we become aware that theology uses a set of technical terms and is influenced by a number of factors which include: the concept of revelation; the meaning and relationship of faith, theology and belief; an understanding of scripture and tradition; the nature of theological language and the concept of mystery, to name just a few. There are indeed other terms and more factors which could be considered, however, these are fundamental.

Note: Each of the terms and influencing factors mentioned above is the subject of

countless books and articles by great theologians throughout history. In this brief summary, I have selected from the literature only one or two approaches to each subject and in some cases have simply outlined various schools of thought without identifying major contributors. The authors were selected because they were familiar to me and what they proposed made some sense. Of course, each theological approach has its strengths and weaknesses and each has its major supporters and critics. This is another way of saying that in these matters we are not dealing with matters of certainty, but with the ongoing processes of theology.

As we proceed, it is also well to keep in mind that, by definition, theology itself is problematic. Since it can never fully express the mysteries it embraces, historically it is riddled with a variety of incomplete and often mistaken theological positions, some of which history has labeled heresy. In a way, even heresy plays an important role in the development of theology, because it usually takes an important theological insight, isolates it from other related insights and eventually demonstrates the error of stressing one insight to the virtual exclusion of others. And St. Augustine gives us this reminder “Do not believe, brethren, that heresies are produced by insignificant souls! Only great men have produced heresies”

For example, the heresy of Arianism denied the true divinity of Jesus and was condemned by the Council of Nicaea (325), on the other hand, the heresy of Docetism so stressed the truth of the divinity of Jesus, that it excluded the truth of His humanity. This, in turn, forced the Church to formulate a position, as it did in the Council of Chalcedon (451), which declared that Jesus is truly divine, but He is also truly human, using the expression: *one Person with two natures*. Not a lot of information, but it sets the mystery in a context that has served as a foundational and normative theological statement about Jesus throughout the subsequent history of Christianity..

What follows is also incomplete, tentative and certainly not the last word, however, I have made every attempt to avoid heresy as such (probably unsuccessfully). Given these brief caveats about the theological enterprise, we will now turn our attention to some of the technical terms and fundamental assumptions of theology.

1. **Revelation** - We probably have more questions than we have answers about revelation. I think McBrien put it pretty well:

The Bible itself points out that “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18). And yet we talk *about* God and *in the name* of God all the time. From where do we derive our information about God? How does God communicate with us? Under what conditions and circumstances does such communication occur? How can we be sure that we have, in fact, been “in touch with” God rather than with our own wish-projections and imaginings, as Freud contended? Does God communicate with others beside ourselves? Or is God hidden, by deliberate design, from great segments of the human family?

Is the *form* of divine self-disclosure verbal, dramatic, mystical, historical, social, political, natural, cosmic, or what? *What* is communicated or disclosed? Is it facts about God and the “other world”? Is it God’s own self? Would we have “known” that which is revealed even if it were not revealed? If God does indeed reveal, why is it that so many people seem either indifferent to, or ignorant of, divine revelation? Or is it perhaps very difficult to pick up God’s “signals of transcendence”? (*Catholicism* p.227).

Since we noted above that revelation is a fundamental concept in theology, it is interesting that we still have so many important questions about it needing clarification. Back in 1966, Gabriel Moran in *The Present Revelation* observed: “Revelation is not a theological concept similar to others but instead a premise for theological construction as a whole....This being true, it might at first seem inexplicable that the *nature* of revelation has been so little explored by Catholic theologians”.(p.22) He notes further that the chief concern of traditional theology was the *fact* rather than the meaning of revelation. “I wish merely to indicate that the large treatises on revelation have astonishingly little to say about revelation itself”. (p.25) And the protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, in *Jesus God and Man*, contends that “the problem of revelation has become the fundamental question in modern theology.”

Therefore, the assumption that revelation is possible and has indeed taken place is the foundational assumption for all that follows. This is an assumption, (or act of faith), because the assertion that God reveals Himself cannot be proven by reason. This follows logically from the fact that even the existence of God cannot be proven, but is accepted as a matter of faith. Furthermore, even if we accept on faith that God exists and that He has revealed Himself (e.g., in Jesus), the question of how revelation is best defined and articulated has never been satisfactorily determined and probably never will. For our purposes, we will proceed from an acceptance in faith that God is real, that God can and does reveal Himself to us (to Moses and in Jesus) and that we can have some understanding based on this revelation.

We mentioned earlier that people of faith are those who believe that there are answers to "The Great Questions" of life. It is believed that these answers are not of our own making, but come from beyond ourselves as a gift initiated by an Other, whom we call God. This gift we call *grace* and insofar as this grace brings about a new self-understanding and unfolds the meaning of the great mysteries of life, it is called *revelation*. So in the revelatory experience God -- the Holy, the Other - “breaks in” to human consciousness and through His self-revelation we begin to understand ourselves and all reality in a new way.

While we accept all this in faith, it does not mean that we should believe just anything. The Catholic theological tradition has always held that while faith is a free gift of God and not simply the fruit of human reason, it must also be “consonant with reason”. Faith must be credible, not incredible.

Approaching Revelation

I find the concept of revelation a difficult one. Like McBrien, I often wonder how it actually happens? What does it look like? If Moses had a revelation on Sinai and I was there with him what would I have witnessed? And what is its content? Is it concepts or a feeling or what? How can I relate the concept and the content to ordinary life? How can one judge real revelations from false ones?

To help provide some answers, we are 1) going to look at a quick general definition of revelation and then 2) consider the notion of “universal” revelation proposed by Rahner, Schillebeeckx and others, and finally, 3) explain what John Macquarrie calls “classic” revelation e.g. in Moses and Jesus.

NOTE: In what follows, I think we can see that these theologians are trying to say that God is present at the innermost depths of our being and that throughout human history, by His gracious power, He makes it possible for us to perceive His presence in a variety of ways - from the classic revelations to Moses and in Jesus, to the ordinary experiences of life seen “in depth”. These various “perceptions” we call revelation or God’s self-communication, even when we do not explicitly identify them with the name “God”.

For example, when we make the commitment to work day in and day out to make our families strong, we are in truth responding to God’s self-revelation (or communication) that He is a God whose creative purpose is to create a human community where human life can flourish. When we help create community anywhere in the world, we establish peace (unity), we overcome alienation, we become one with the “creative movement” of God who has revealed Himself in our ordinary lives as the Creator who calls us to live in peace. We believe that our ability to “go beyond” ourselves in the service of others is a grace, a gift from God Who reveals Himself as the One Who calls us to live in the peace which He wills for all creatures.

For Christians, Jesus is the event in history where the self-communication of God occurs in an explicit and unrepeatable way. In truth, when answering the question about the nature of God, Christians can say that “God is like Jesus”. This statement does not imply that we therefore know a great deal about God, but that what we do know comes through most clearly in the person, work and teaching of Jesus. To quote Roger Haight: “Jesus supplies, the central symbol and norm for understanding God” (*Jesus Symbol of God* p.88). *The history of Christian theology has been to attempt to put into words the experience of God in Jesus.*

However, some would say that perhaps the most profound words about the God we seek are often found, not in the reasoned words of theologians or creeds and doctrines, but in the poetic words of the mystics, the great searchers who have almost caught a glimpse of God. They burn in our hearts and instruct us where to look for a glimpse of God’s shadow:

“By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us,

penetrates us, and molds us. We imagine it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers". (Teilhard de Chardin)

"We live in all we seek. The hidden shows up in too-plain sight. It lives captive on the face of the obvious -- the people, events and things of the day -- to which we as sophisticated children have long since become oblivious. What a hideout: holiness lies spread and borne over the surface of time and stuff like color". (Annie Dillard *Holy Sparks - A Prayer for the Silent God*)

Revelation - A definition

Contrary to a traditional definition, revelation does not consist of a number of divinely revealed truths or doctrines about God or information about another world distinct from us. As Richard McBrien observes in *Do We Need the Church?*:

Before the theological renewal of the last few decades, revelation was often described, even by professional theologians, as 'the communication of those truths which are necessary and profitable for salvation', while faith was defined as 'the intellectual assent given to those truths'. No serious theologian today would regard these definitions as adequate to the realities in question. (p. 190)

This primarily intellectual approach was encouraged by the Church because of its historical emphasis on verbal formulations in the Bible, creeds and doctrines. However, the Bible is not revelation. Creeds are not revelation. Doctrines are not revelation. While all these do indeed mediate some revelatory content, nevertheless, they are only witnesses to or symbols of revelation. *Revelation comes through some human experience of the reality of God . Creeds, doctrines, scriptures are all attempts to interpret and communicate this experience. And all such attempts fall short of their objective.*

Revelation can best be defined as *God's gift of His self-communication to us*, as mediated or transmitted through the medium of human experience. God can only reveal Himself within the history of our human experience. And since we can have no direct revelation of God ("No one has ever seen God", Jn 1:18), modern theologians speak of revelation as *God's symbolic self-communication or symbolic mediation within human experience.*

What we have just described is true of all interpersonal human experience. We communicate or reveal ourselves to each other through symbols, i.e., language, body, gifts, etc. And in this revelatory process there are four elements: (1) *the person revealing*, (2) *an experience of this person*, (3) *an interpretation of this experience* and (4) *an attempt to communicate all of this to others*. Whether the person experienced is God or a friend, the reality of the person is always experienced in some way, then we interpret this experience within the context of our own life and times to give some meaning to the experience and then we try to communicate or speak about this

experience. This is not a simple process. And we can be sure that element (4) never quite matches element (1), because no person can fully reveal oneself to another.

This is especially true when the reality we speak of is God. All experiences of God are indirect, symbolic and fragmentary. Add to this our feeble attempts to interpret this experience within our limited frame of reference and then the difficult and largely unsuccessful attempt to communicate all of this to others. This attempt at communication we call theology and it is by definition an incomplete, ongoing process that never fully grasps the reality it seeks to communicate - we only plunge deeper into the Mystery.

Therefore, since revelation always happens within human experience, this symbolic revelatory experience of God is always interpreted by the one receiving it. We humans always interpret our experiences and do so within a certain personal historical context or culture, so revelation is always time-specific, culturally conditioned and always situational. Revelation is received according to the mode of the receiver.

Moreover, the interpretation of a religious experience is always incomplete and provisional. For example, when Moses had his revelatory experience, it was within the context of his personal history, which included his *past* i.e., the history and culture of his Semitic ancestors and his *present*, i.e., the situation of his people now suffering in Egypt. And so he interpreted his experience of God in relation to his concrete “situation in life” and thus was able to understand and relate this experience of God to the needs of his people - freedom from slavery. There are no abstract “truths” communicated through revelation. Rather, revelation allows us to see ordinary life “in depth” and includes a “glimpse” of God as the ultimate ground and meaning of all that we experience.

Note: It is unfortunate that the ordinary Catholic gets so little help in coming to grips with what we mean by something so basic as revelation. The idea often projected is that God “said” this or “said” that, just like we say things to one another in our everyday lives, and that these sayings were then written down and we ought to believe it as the Word of God. Faith is then often defined as accepting these “revealed” statements.

In Sunday sermons priests still say things like “God inscribed the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone” or “God said to Moses”, this and that. I don’t mind that language if we do not have to take it literally. Or that every sentence following “God said” is actually any kind of divine utterance. For example, do we really want to ask people to believe that on Mt. Sinai some “divine finger” came out of a cloud and wrote words on a stone tablet? Do we really want to ask people to believe that God actually, audibly “said” to Moses: “These are the laws you shall set before them.” (Ex. 21:1)...“When a man sells his daughter into slavery, she shall not go free as a male slave may”? (Ex. 21:7). Are we to understand that Yahweh was giving divine approval of the slave trade and indicating in detail how it was to be carried out with a harsher rule for women than men? No indeed, but the task of Moses was to communicate his unique, albeit primitive, experience of God, which no words could adequately express, into a message for his people within his and their current culture and historical situation, which included their unquestioned cultural acceptance of slavery. This is no moral condemnation of Moses or his people,

because it was not until late in the 19th century that the Catholic Church officially condemned slavery outright.

We need to make it clear that while the Ten Commandments can be traced to Moses, these and the rest of the rest of the Covenant Code as contained in Ex. 20-23 originated within a long tradition of Amorite law, albeit *profoundly reinterpreted by the Mosaic faith*. The Amorite ancestors of Moses brought with them a rich cultural heritage which almost certainly included the Code of Hammurabi, a legal code formulated some 400 years before Moses, a code which significantly influenced the legal systems of the ancient Near East for centuries and undoubtedly influenced Israelite law as articulated by Moses and later generations. (The Code of Hammurabi can be seen today in the Louvre Museum in Paris.)

On a more positive note, the Catholic tradition of natural law may help us here. The Church has long taught that the natural law provides a ground for morality based on a process of human reason alone, without any necessary reference to revelation. Through experience and a reasoned attempt to understand human nature and those human actions that contribute to the flourishing of humans and their societies, human laws can be formulated which contribute to this flourishing. This reasoned process could provide the basis for certain elements of the Code of Hammurabi being included by Moses in the Ten Commandments. From this process of reasoned reflection on human nature (created by God) can we not say, at least poetically, that, in truth, these commands are “from the mouth of God”?

St. Thomas taught that the Ten Commandments were an expression of the natural law. However, St. Thomas also taught that the natural law is ultimately an expression of the divine law. As so, perhaps, we can say that through his revelatory experience, Moses “saw” that the ultimate ground of the Ten Commandments was indeed the God who had sought him out and so he could truthfully speak of them as coming from the “mouth” of Yahweh. Not in some gross anthropomorphic way, but through a deep, mystical intuition resulting from his experience of Yahweh in the “burning bush”. Just a thought.

As the stories and myths of ancient cultures (creation, flood, etc.) were changed, reinterpreted and became (in Genesis) vehicles of a unique understanding of God, the true God, as experienced by Moses in the “burning bush”, so too the law codes were adopted and modified to express a *developing* understanding of the God of Moses as a moral God who called His people to be moral. *So revelation is real, but it is always an interpretation of a unique religious experience of God within a certain cultural context and the expression of this experience is necessarily, incomplete, progressive and couched in terms of a certain cultural context - its laws, cosmologies, myths, language, etc..*

To continue, it seems clear that revelation within a community (e.g., Israel) always has a history, a history that contains the possibility of always refining the meaning of the initial revelatory experience. To understand the implications of this is to be warned of any temptation to believe that we have captured God in any religious experience, book, creed, theological system, or papal pronouncement, infallible or not. Our understanding of God

may be real, but it is always symbolic and always incomplete.

The implications of the symbolic nature of revelation is even true of the Incarnation. Roger Haight's book, *Jesus Symbol of God*, is an excellent expansion of this concept. Of course, the symbolic mediation of Jesus is unique. In Jesus "The *mediator* and the *mediated* are one and the same...Christ is at once the one who mediates for us and the divine reality which is mediated to us." (McBrien p. 266). However, it is a truism to say that, *by definition, the humanity of Jesus masked more that it revealed of His divinity.*

Paul Tillich in his *Systematic Theology* makes a strong argument for the necessity of symbolic language in speaking of God. For Tillich the only nonsymbolic statement about God is that God is "being-itself". "However, after this has been said, nothing else can be said about God as God which is not symbolic." A religious symbol, "...the symbol which points to the divine, can be a true symbol only if it participates in the power of the divine to which it points". (vol. 1 p. 239) Thus for Tillich and for Haight, Jesus is the unique and normative symbol of God. All other efforts to mediate the divine, i.e. Scripture, Tradition, doctrines, theologies etc. are an attempt, and only an attempt, to communicate through "secondary" symbols the message contained in the self-revelation of God and how this message helps us in our search for answers to the Great Questions of Life.

Of course, difficult questions remain: What do we really mean by this definition? What would the experience of revelation be like? When we say symbolic self-communication do we mean the symbol of words and imagine that Moses or the prophets had conversations with God (in Hebrew yet!) like we would have conversations over lunch? Could Moses and Yahweh have had a picnic on Mt. Sinai and had their pictures taken? What do we mean when we say God acts in history? Did the crossing of the "Red (Reed) Sea" really look like the movie? What are all these conversations in the OT prefaced by "God said"?

Part of the answer is that the "God said" idiom is certainly a literary form, imputing religious expressions and laws to God. The other part of the answer is that when we say that God "acts" in history, we do not mean that this is some extraordinary observable fact. The "acts of God" in history are detected by an interpretation of history in which events are seen "in depth" only through the eyes of faith based on some revelatory experience.

The saving "acts" of God attested to in the Scriptures were not self-evident. Those without faith would see the history of Israel as explainable in purely human terms and causality. We cannot conjure up Hollywood images of "passing through the Red Sea" to help us here. The Israelites escaped from Egypt like many other people escaped the harsh hand of Egypt. No one on the spot could have observed anything miraculous in this event (There is no mention of this event in Egyptian history). Only in retrospect, seeing this event "in depth" through the prism of faith could it be declared an "act of God" in which God is revealed as savior. *Perhaps, revelation can be understood as the discovery of the eternal presence of God in all of human history seen in a specific historical event.*

Note: Let us consider a weak, but perhaps useful analogy. Imagine yourself sitting in a quiet room. Your unaided senses tell you that you are surrounded by silence. Let us call this the experience of “ordinary world” perceived by our senses. Now turn on the radio and search through the stations. You then realize that while it is true that you were sitting in silence, you were also, in fact, surrounded *on another level* by a blizzard of sound. The sound is real and exists whether or not you use a radio or whether or not you believe it is there, but to hear its message you have to “tune in”. Therefore, perhaps a “religious experience” or a “moment of revelation” happens when one is able, by the grace of God, to “tune in” to the eternal presence of God in human history.

To press the analogy, the history of Israel or the life of Jesus when observed by ordinary people, using their ordinary senses would not necessarily be perceived as full of the presence and power of God. But these same events seen “in depth” aided by the “radio” of a religious experience and the faith it produces, reveal a history and a Person full of messages from an unseen God, not detected by ordinary observation.

Without beating the analogy to death, the gift of a radio (the revelatory experience) will allow us to experience our world “in depth” with all kinds of messages which cannot be experienced by unaided sensory perception. So perhaps we can say that the gift of revelation also allows us to have a religious experience of our world and receive “messages” not available to our unaided senses. The testimony of the Scriptures, using myth, legend, poetry, history, parables etc., is an attempt to communicate something of our world seen “in depth” through the gift of a religious experience or a moment of revelation.

Universal revelation

It is worth noting that religious experience of some sort or another is common to all human beings. Does this then mean that access to revelation is possible for all human beings? In Catholic tradition the answer is yes. This belief is based on the long held doctrine of God’s “*universal salvific will*”, meaning that salvation is possible for all human beings. The doctrine is based on St. Paul’s assertion in 1 Tim 2:3-6:

Such prayer is right, and approved by God our Savior, *whose will it is that all men should find salvation and come to know the truth*. For there is one God, and also one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus, himself man, who sacrificed himself to win freedom for all mankind...

And the Second Vatican Council states:

God, who through the Word creates all things (cf. Jn. 1:3) and keeps them in existence, gives men an enduring witness to Himself in created realities (cf. Rom. 1:19-20). (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* n. 3)

Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those

who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to divine grace. (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* n.16)

All this holds true (to battle against evil) not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery. (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* n. 22)

Likewise, other religions to be found everywhere strive variously to answer the restless searching's of the human heart by proposing "ways", which consist of teachings, rules of life, and sacred ceremonies.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. (*Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* n. 2)

In Romans 1:19-20 Paul states:

"For all that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes; indeed God himself has disclosed it to them. His invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity, have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason, in the things he has made."

The great Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, gave a great deal of thought to the problem of relating the fact of the universal will of God to save all humans to the fact of the necessity of faith for salvation. Commenting on the universal salvific will of God and the relationship of salvation and revelation, Karl Rahner writes "salvation without faith, and faith without genuine revelation, is impossible". If salvation is a real possibility for all, as Scripture and the Church affirms, and salvation demands faith, which in turn demands revelation, then the possibility of revelation must be present always and everywhere and must be available within the universal history of mankind and, in some way, within the personal history of each human being.

Rahner speaks of a "supernatural horizon" which must be a part of all human experience. This is based on Rahner's concept of human "divinized transcendentality" by which all human beings are by definition open to the experience of God, because God is present in every person as an offer of grace.

Karl Rahner ...understands God as *the* Transcendent, above, beyond, and

over everything else. God is the one to whom all reality is oriented, by a principle which is itself interior to all of reality. That principle is God. God is the “supernatural existential” which makes possible the knowledge of, and the movement toward, the Absolute, in (which) we find our human perfection. (McBrien p. 314)

For Rahner, the history of revelation cannot be confined to the Old and New Testaments, but in some way coincides with the entire collective and individual history of the human race. For without this possibility of revelation, there is no possibility of faith and therefore salvation would not be universally available, but restricted to that tiny minority of human beings who have had contact with and responded to the revelation communicated in the Old and New Testaments.

Furthermore, when speaking of non-Christian religions, Rahner concludes that God saves human beings *through* these religions, not *in spite* of them. Thus non-Christian religions have the potentiality to lead their members to the same salvation enjoyed by Christians. For Rahner, non-Christian religions are not merely products of human creativity or wisdom, but rather God has chosen to be revealed through them.

This statement goes beyond the traditional Catholic notion of “natural theology” where God is revealed in the grandeur of creation (as in Rom. 1:19-20) or that people are related to the Church somehow by an individual baptism of desire. For Rahner, the experience of God in non-Christian religions is not merely “natural” knowledge of God. In fact, Muslims, Hindus and others enjoy a “supernatural revelation” in which God specifically wills to enter their lives in their individual and corporate religious experiences which constitute their various historical religions.

These conclusions led Rahner to affirm that when missionaries approach non-Christians, they are not to be viewed as strangers to the saving grace of God. Indeed, they may possess true holiness beyond that of some Christians. Because of the fact of universal revelation and the possibility of saving faith, Rahner reached the his now famous conclusion that Christians must look on certain non-Christians as “*anonymous Christians*” because they too are transformed by the grace of God.

The Dominican theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, reached a similar conclusion in his book *Revelation and Theology* :

Faith is man’s surrender to divine revelation. On the basis, then, of the absolute necessity of faith for salvation, God’s universal will to save includes the real possibility that all men, wherever they live, may accept salvation by (anonymous) faith, and thus be anonymously confronted with God’s saving revelation...In other words, the history of salvation is not restricted exclusively to the religion of Israel or to Christianity, but is, because of Christ, an event of universal significance.

In speaking of non-Christian revelation McBrien comments:

Others who have access to God's self-communication apart from explicit faith in Christ may exceed their Christian brothers and sisters in both knowledge and love....God continues to be disclosed not only to individuals but also to communities and to the world at large in the same way as before: through natural phenomena, through historical events, through prophetic figures, through the lives of truly holy people, through the "signs of the times". On the other hand, the more private those disclosures, the less subject they are to critical scrutiny and testing and the more prone they are to distortion, illusion, projection, and misinterpretation. (*Catholicism* p. 268)

These observations bring up the whole issue of interpreting the phenomenon of religious pluralism. This is too vast a topic to be entertained here. However, we can note that Catholic theology is trying to steer between two extreme views: 1) all religions are the same (relativism) and 2) only baptized Christians can be saved (exclusivism).

While rejecting that all religions are the same, Catholic theology begins with such statements as Paul's comments in Rom.1:19-20 and 1Tim. 2:3-6. Next it notes St. Thomas' comment that: "When a man arrives (morally) at the age of reason, the first thing to which his mind must turn is to deliberate about himself. And if he directs himself towards the true end, grace is given him and original sin is remitted." (St. I-II, q.89,a.6). And finally, the bishops made this simple statement at Vatican II: We are, "from the very circumstance of (our) origin, already invited to converse with God" (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 19).

To date, Catholic theology has not yet (and may never) successfully developed a theology that harmonizes its belief in the universal salvific will of God and its belief that Jesus is the unique mediator of salvation.

Note: Something to think about -- in the next section we are going to discuss "classic" revelation as in Moses and Jesus. However, if revelation is best understood as God's "self-communication" then can we really speak of the actual content of revelation in Moses and even in Jesus as being unique? In other words, might we not say that while the mediators/symbols of God's self-communication are unique, the actual content of revelation cannot be the private possession of Jews and Christians. God's self-communication takes place everywhere: Chardin "by means of all created things" and Dillard "holiness lies spread and borne over the surface of time and stuff like color."

The vehicles, modes or symbols of this revelation may be diverse, but their "content", God Himself, is identical. *This is not to say that "all religions are the same"*, but to affirm that the God who creates and loves each one of us, seeks us out in His own mysterious way and reveals Himself to us. We may not yet have the theological know-how to explain "how it works", but we are in no position to say that God does not reveal Himself to all peoples everywhere - the Spirit moves where He will. Just a thought - one stolen in part from Gabriel Moran in *The Present Revelation*.

Classic revelation

The revelation available in creation referred to by Paul in Romans, the universal revelation proposed by Rahner and Vatican II and that which Schillebeeckx calls “anonymous” revelation is contrasted by John Macquarrie to the notion of “classic” revelation on which communities of faith are founded.

Christians believe that no individual ancient religious experience or ancient religion ever came close to the understanding of God contained in the OT or, certainly, in the NT. This understanding of God was based on the “classic” revelational experiences of Moses and Jesus respectively. Revelation becomes progressively and dramatically more explicit and clear through the history of the OT people as interpreted by the prophets and reaches its clearest and definitive expression in Jesus, as interpreted by the apostolic Church and continued by the Church throughout history.

Note: There is a great mystery here to be explored. Why are we within the Judeo-Christian the privileged recipients of this most explicit revelation of God? The OT people called it election, the NT simply call it grace. We shall explore it more when we consider the nature and mission of the Church.

We noted above that theology does not occur in a vacuum. This is equally true of revelation. Most people experience revelation in and through a community of believers, starting most importantly with the family and the local church. John Macquarrie in, *Principles of Christian Theology*, makes some important distinctions about the types of revelatory experiences of people in faith communities:

I have talked in terms of a directly given revelation. This, however, is probably a relatively rare occurrence, and we must remember...the distinction that was drawn between "classic" or "primordial" revelations on which communities of faith get founded (e.g. Moses and the burning bush), and the subsequent experience of the community in which the primordial revelation keeps coming alive, so to speak, in the ongoing life of the community so that the original disclosure of the holy is being continually renewed....let us simply note that the general description of revelation given (here)...is not meant to imply that every religious person has a direct revelation of Being. For the great majority, it will be a case of reliving some classic revelation.

Rudolf Otto in his *Idea of the Holy* makes a similar observation when speaking of divination (an encounter with the divine):

Genuine divination....is not concerned at all with the way in which a (revelatory) phenomenon....came into existence, but with what it *means*, that is, with its significance as a ‘sign’ of the holy....(and while divination)

is a universal potentiality of man as such (it) is by no means to be found in *actuality* the universal possession of every single man; very frequently it is only disclosed as a special endowment and equipment of particular gifted individuals.

While not denying the possibility of universal, personal revelation, Macquarrie and Otto argue that most of us come in contact with revelation, not directly, but through a reliving of a classic revelation. In this scenario, classic revelation, in contrast to universal revelation, is described as a “direct” revelation experienced only by a few “gifted individuals”. In the Church, this reliving of classic revelation includes all theologizing throughout the centuries from the great Councils of the Church, through theologians down to the living faith of ordinary people.

A word of caution. While this notion of “classical revelation” to a few “gifted individuals” is undoubtedly an important insight, Abraham Maslow in his book, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, give us an important warning. He agrees that the “universal nucleus of every known high religion has been the private, lonely, personal illumination, revelation, or ecstasy of some acutely sensitive prophet or seer.” He calls these revelatory moments “peak experiences”. Religion then tries to communicate these “peak experiences” or what Macquarrie terms “classic revelations” to those who have not had these revelatory experience. Maslow labels these people “non-peakers”. As Macquarrie contends above, “For the great majority, it will be the case of reliving some classic revelation” (a non-peak experience *a la* Maslow).

Then comes Maslow’s important insight for us:

In a word, organized religion can be thought of as an effort to communicate peak-experiences to non-peakers...Often, to make it more difficult, this job falls into the hands of non-peakers...The peak-experiences and their experiential reality ordinarily are not transmittable to non-peakers. What happens...is that they simply concretize all of the symbols, all of the words, all of the statutes, all of the ceremonies, and by a process of functional autonomy make *them* (italics his), rather than the original revelation, into the sacred things and sacred activities.

This is what we mentioned earlier as a tendency in the Church to view revelation only as a “set of truths” to be believed, rather than to see revelation as the self-communication of God. *All of our symbols, theologies, and dogmatic “truths” used in our attempts to transmit this self-communication of God must never be made the content of revelation itself* (see p.9, A Definition).

This insight leads us into the consideration of one more problem. I believe it was Voltaire who aptly quipped that God had created man in His own image and that man had returned Him the favor. Of course, there will always be bad theology, projected wish fulfillments and misinterpretation littering the landscape of what we profess to believe. Therefore, we need to maintain a constant process of development, purification and reinterpretation of

our current understanding of revelation.

In this process, Macquarrie submits that it is the function of “classic” revelation to help save us from subjectivism, by constantly submitting the varieties of individual religious experience and theological thought within the community back to the relatively objective content of the “classic” revelation on which the community is founded e.g. the Scriptures. This, of course, demands a careful and critical study of the ancient sources of classical revelation, so that the real content of classic revelation is available for us the “re-live”. Historically, and certainly in the Catholic tradition, it has been the function of the living tradition or teaching authority of the Church to oversee this theological process so that fundamental error (heresy) can be avoided. In the Catholic tradition, individual experiences of revelation “must be tested by the Church, and measured against her own corporate experience as well as the privileged experience of the apostolic Church. (McBrien p. 194).

In a definite contrast to the concept of universal revelation, as noted above, Macquarrie defined “classic” revelation as those revelatory experiences on which communities of faith are founded. In the Judeo-Christian context this means the revelatory experiences of Moses and Jesus. In a similar observation, Otto suggested that genuine divination of “The Holy” is perhaps only for a gifted few.

For example, perhaps we can say that in the episode of the “burning bush”, Moses had some sort of religious experience or divination and from this experience received an explicit, but primitive notion of God. A God on whom he believed he could depend in his mission to return to Egypt to rescue his people. Later as the prophets interpreted the history of the Israelites, with Moses as their liberator and lawgiver, they saw the “hand of God” in the making of this history. It was their encounter and faith in the God of Moses that created and defined their history.

They believed that God entered their history through Moses and because of their faith in Him, He rescued them from bondage in Egypt, made them into a people and sustained them as His elected people throughout their history. This was their historical experience of salvation, which they believed was brought about solely by the initiative of God, through His self-communication to them mediated through Moses. If Moses had not had that experience in the burning bush, they would not have been liberated from Egypt and would not have become a people. It was a simple as that. Looking back on history through the prism of their faith, the prophets proclaimed that God “revealed” Himself as active in their history, as savior and as sustainer in their daily experiences of life.

In Jesus, the revelatory experience is more direct. God becomes man, the eternal Word made flesh. His life is divine activity in history. Jesus heals, forgives and announces that God is Father with unconditional love for all, One who loves sinners and comes not to judge but to give eternal life. Jesus reveals what God has always been doing in history - calling all whom He has created to the fullness of life, a life with an eternal destiny in the Kingdom of God. Jesus does not leave a book of wisdom or sacred truths, but rather the legacy of a life which revealed in concrete form this unconditional love of God and what

it means to be truly human.

After His death and resurrection, His followers began to formulate the Good News of who Jesus was, what He taught and what He had accomplished. The apostles, like the prophets before them, looked back and interpreted the meaning of their experience of Jesus. They proclaimed their belief that, indeed, He was the Son of God. To have seen and heard Jesus was to have seen and heard the Father. In His life, death and resurrection they saw that Jesus revealed that sin and death are conquered by the power of God and that the Kingdom of God is offered to all who accept it. And acceptance of the Kingdom was seen as a conversion to a way of life found in Jesus, the life of a servant, a life for others.

Summary

In “universal” revelation all human beings are given the opportunity in their daily lives to perceive a “call” from the depths of their being (whether they recognize it from God or not) to abandon their self-centeredness and give themselves into the loving service of others. To decide to do this is an act of faith (at least an anonymous faith) in which they find their salvation.

In “classic” revelation, God reveals Himself in a more explicit way especially in the person of Jesus. Through the life and teaching of Jesus it is revealed that the Father loves us unconditionally and calls us love our neighbor as ourselves. Thus, faith is not a call to accept intellectually some list of divine “truths”, but a call to *commit our whole being to a way of life* characterized by a love of self, others and the world in the imitation of Jesus. In this we are reconciled to God and find our salvation.

Conclusions

After all of that, perhaps at least we have some clarity. It seems clear that revelation consists not in certain formulated “truths” about God. Revelation consists in the symbolic self-communication of God through the medium of human experience, a communication that is available in some way to all people throughout history either individually or in the corporate experience expressed in various religions, but becoming more explicit in the history of Israel and taking definitive, unrepeatable and normative form in Jesus.

Revelation, occurring in various ways, is the manifestation by God of His creative power active throughout our individual and corporate lives. Revelation is always interpreted by the one receiving it within a certain individual and cultural context. Revelation is not abstract, but calls us and gives us the power to respond to the call to live a new life so that we may be fully alive in Him, now and forever.

There are some who claim (Burtchaell) that what we call classic revelation was not necessary, but constitutes an act of over-abundant love. The creative, sustaining and redeeming presence of God is available to all human life at all times and the revelation of

this divine presence is more of a gift (grace) than a necessity. Something to think about.

A Final Word

One of the goals of this undertaking was to relate theology to ordinary life. So far, this modern, but “standard” treatment of Revelation really does not do this. Next, we will examine two theological approaches which focus on how our faith, derived from revelation, when submitted to the theological process can produce statements of belief or doctrines that can have an immediate and experienced effect on our daily lives.

2. Faith, Theology and Belief - The assent to revelation is called faith and from faith flows theology and belief. In logical order, theology follows faith, and belief follows theology. Furthermore, belief can be personal, derived from a person's own theologizing or it can be institutional as contained in Church doctrines or dogmas. Here is an example of a Church dogma: In the New Testament Jesus is proclaimed as human and divine (**faith**), over the years the Church tried to formulate exactly what this means (**theology**), finally through deliberations which included the Councils of Chalcedon 451 and Constantinople 553, a creedal statement emerged which stated that Jesus is one divine Person encompassing two natures, the nature of God and the nature of man (**belief**). In other words, faith, as the assent to revelation, is original datum or starting point, theology is the process and belief is the product.

There are, however, many Catholics, including bishops, priests and laity, who seem to believe that faith and belief can somehow be independent of theology. They feel that theology is generally the venue of theologians, a pesky lot, who are constantly changing their minds and are often at odds with religious authorities. According to this view, what we must do is hold to and teach "The Faith", not theology. This assumes (as mentioned above) that "The Faith" is a collection of certain revealed truths that come to us pre-packaged from God and are held in something called "the deposit of faith" to be guarded from heresy, dispensed by the official Church and to be accepted by the faithful as a condition of salvation.

What this approach fails to recognize is that what is here identified and "The Faith" is *itself* the product of a theology and, in some cases, not the best or most helpful of theologies. So while it is certainly true that faith is not theology, it is equally true that faith *cannot* and *does not* exist independently, in some pure form, apart from theology. As St. Anselm defined it nine centuries ago, theology is "faith seeking understanding". And faith is always seeking understanding. Therefore, since, by definition, "The Faith" always exists in some theological form, the question is always not *whether* the faith shall be transmitted according to some theological interpretation, but rather *which* theological interpretation is best suited to the task at a particular moment in human history.

This is an important issue, because while theology seeks to express the content of faith in the clearest and most coherent language available and make it meaningful to our daily lives, theology is always provisional, always culturally conditioned, always inadequate and, therefore, always in need of renewal. Every theological interpretation, in the course

of time, demands a new act of theological interpretation. We can never abandon the task of theology on the assumption that we have all the "truth" locked up in some new or ancient set of formulae. *The task of theology is to keep faith alive and to do that we must keep theology alive.*

In commenting on the formulations of dogmas in the Church, Karl Rahner observes:

The clearest formulations, the most sanctified formulas, the classic condensations of the centuries-long work of the Church in prayer, reflection and struggle concerning God's mysteries; all these derive their life from the fact that they are not end but beginning, not goals but means, truths which open the way to the ever greater Truth. (*Theological Investigations*, vol. I, p. 149.)

We will deal with this again, but there is a "good news - bad news" aspect to dogmas. First, the bad news. It is not often that we reflect on the fact that in our western culture we cannot escape our Greek intellectual heritage. Like our Greek forefathers (Plato, Aristotle, etc.) we are driven the "make sense" of things. We want answers and answers in some logical, syllogistic order. It sounds a bit odd, but we seem to operate (esp. in theology) on the premise that there are "truths" out there somewhere just waiting to be discovered and nailed down for all time in some dogmatic formula. However, the NT on which many dogmas are based, simply does not operate on Greek syllogisms. The NT may be written in Greek, with some Greek overtones (Gospel of John), but by and large it is the product of a Hebraic mind set. It presents us with mysteries to be eternally explored through myth, symbol, images, parables and metaphor, rather than detailed, complete truths to be etched for all time in the stones of dogmatic formulations, which then serve as eternal standards of orthodoxy.

The Hebraic mind set is chaotic, not orderly. It can handle contradictions. It is in the business of creating mosaics instead of producing reams of detailed, deductive treatises which in the end bear little resemblance to the eternal mystery of God's self-communication in the Jesus of the NT. It takes us by the hand and leads us into a way of life which no "reasonable" person would accept. It does not proclaim "come reason with me" but rather "sell all you have and follow Me". We are asked to give our hearts, not just our minds. There are no dogmas in the NT writings, there is only Jesus revealing to us a Father with an unconditional love for each of us that throws our human logic out the window. In the NT we are simply presented with a Person Who asks us to believe, to follow, to serve, to take up our cross, which St. Paul admits is a "stumbling-block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles". No set of dogmas can ever hope to fully capture the reality of Jesus.

An Important Note: We must remember that faith involves the whole person. At its core, faith is a personal response to the living God Who addresses us in Jesus and is preached by the Church. Much more than an intellectual acceptance of certain truths, faith is a personal encounter with God which transforms the way we view ourselves, others and the world. Based on this transformed view of ourselves and others we conduct our lives in a

certain way. For example, if we accept the word of Jesus that God is Father and thus all humanity is family, we will look on our fellow human beings in a new way and we will react to them in a new way. Our lives will be different because we have faith.

In the final analysis we believe (have faith) because this transformation of our world view makes sense to us. It gives coherence and meaning to our lives and it answers the “The Great Questions” which our existence as human beings presents to us.

Perhaps our most significant contact with God comes in moments of silent worship as John Haught reflects : “...every consistent theology sooner or later recognizes the utter inadequacy even of our loftiest religious labels for ultimate reality. Accordingly, many spiritualities eventually insist upon the need for silence as perhaps the most appropriate form of worship” (Science and Religion p. 98).

Speaking of silence, Lawrence Cunningham, writing in the Notre Dame Magazine, observed that as we can only hear music against the background of silence, so it might be said that “God is to the world as silence is to the music”. Thus the silent God is the “background” or better yet the very ground of the world itself. Without the matrix of God, the world could not exist nor could “make sense”.

Now the good news about dogmas. Historically dogmas have served the Church well. In setting the limits of our formulations of belief, that have preserved us from those who would have twisted the faith in such a way that it no longer communicated the message of the Scriptures. In the early Church when the Docetists denied the humanity of Jesus and the Adoptionists and Arians denied His divinity, the Church responded in the Councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431). From these Councils a doctrinal formulation emerged that stated that Jesus was one Person with two natures, human and divine. This formulation has set the limits of belief about the Person and nature of Jesus up to the current time. And there were many other heresies that had the potential to split the infant Church. For its survival, the Church had to make some formulations of its faith to set the rational limits of beliefs about Jesus and His message, so that this message would not be fundamentally corrupted.

What we must remember is that these doctrinal or dogmatic statements are provisional, culturally conditioned and in constant need of interpretation. As Gregory Baum put it in *Faith and Doctrine* p.41: “Christians must constantly reach out beyond the formula to the mystery”. Furthermore, while dogmas may serve the Church, in and of themselves, they are not salvational. It is only in loving ourselves, others and the world, through the grace of the Spirit of God, that we become one with Jesus and thereby return, like the Prodigal Son, to the loving embrace of the Father. This is our salvation.

The “Object” of Faith, The Divine Mystery

There is a more fundamental reason why the task of theology is never ending. It is this: since the object of faith is ultimately God, Who is and forever remains a mystery, there never can be one complete theology for all time. This is true because God cannot be

conceptualized or objectified. God is not "a being", certainly not some anthropomorphic "Big Guy in the sky", alongside other beings in the world to be observed, described and conceptually captured in timeless doctrines and dogmas. God is inexpressible mystery.

Karl Rahner tells us that God is not "a being" separate from the human person as one being to another, but is perhaps best described as "Being-itself", at once permeating and transcending the person. Because God permeates as well as transcends us, there is no standpoint from which we can get a "look at" God objectively.

Theologians, who are trying to relate our understanding of God to modern scientific concepts such as chaos theory, chance, evolution, quantum theory and indeterminacy, are tentatively formulating the mystery of God in terms relative to change and becoming. One of these theological schools is called "process theology". It uses concepts far removed from past formulations which tended to view God as a supreme, unchanging "object" who from time to time intervenes into human affairs. While I do not believe process theology is "the answer", it is an understandable reaction to a theological tradition that had neglected the immanent pole of our transcendent/immanent God. Modern theologians also realize that these kind of reformulations are understandably products of historical moments in the ongoing process of scientific discovery and of our attempts to speak of God from within our "moments of scientific discovery".

While a scientific analysis of our world may indeed help us discover something of the Creator through his creation, science can never capture God in its categories. John Haught in his book *Science and Religion* makes this observation:

But if there is indeed an all-encompassing divine mystery, it would comprehend us without our being able to comprehend it. By definition it would be off limits to scientific verification. Indeed, if science could grasp it, it would no longer be the infinite God in whom we believe, but merely something trivially finite, subject to the poverty of our own limited cognitional dominion.

...The divine mystery is the ground and encompassing horizon of nature, not an object that falls within it. It is that which holds the universe in being, not something that could be observed as though it were a mere addendum to the list of finite things that science can comprehend. And we become sensitized to its reality not by trying to master it...but by surrendering ourselves to it in the act of religious worship. (pp.84-85)

No matter which philosophical system we care to adopt, if we believe that God is absolute mystery, the inevitable question arises: How is it possible for us to talk of God? The facts are that revelation has to be thought about and we can only think about it by using finite images, symbols and human words. What must be admitted is that these human images and words, which we must use in talking about God, cannot be used literally or univocally, but must be understood under some other appropriate mode of signification.

For St. Thomas this “appropriate mode of signification” is called "analogy of proper proportionality". This means that when we say something about God, e.g., God is Father, we in fact deny 99% of that concept. That is, God is not a being, not male, not like your dad, etc.. So while we can continue to speak of God as if God is a being or a father or a male, we must remember that these words certainly do not apply to God in the way that they apply to our earthly fathers.

As Heinrich Fries observes: “God is no particular object, no object like the things we encounter. God is rather the unobjectifiable ground of everything” (Fundamental Theology p. 88). However, human language and experience is the only language we have, it is the best we can do, and in fact these words do give us some insight, albeit analogous, into the reality of the God who reveals Himself to us.

For St. Thomas, it is easier to say what God is not than what God is. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, Ch. 30, St. Thomas states “ We cannot grasp what God is, but only what he is not and how other things are related to him.” This insight or mode of doing theology is traditionally called the *via negativa* - the negative way. This approach emphasizes the fact that God is essentially unknowable and that all human words, whether doctrines or infallible dogmas, or even the person of Jesus only point in some halting way to the absolute mystery of God. Therefore, theologically and philosophically we are on surer ground when we speak of what God is *not*, than when we speak of what God *is*. It is said that after St. Thomas had completed his vast collection of theological works, he had a mystical religious experience, after which he was quoted as saying, “All I have written is like straw”. John’s Gospel speaks of Jesus as “light”, perhaps we can relate to Einstein who said “The rest of my life, I’ll be trying to understand the meaning of light”.

Trying to express the same insight of God as total mystery, Martin Buber, a Jewish theologian said it well: "God is the one who can never be expressed, but only addressed." And for Karl Barth, the great Protestant theologian, God is "known as the unknown, speaking in his silence". While the Catholic theologian, Thomas Merton wrote that "knowing God is not knowing and seeing God is not seeing." In trying to answer the question “Who is God” the great mystics have said: “God is everything and nothing” St. John of the Cross; “God is darkness and light”, St. Bonaventure; “God is the Godness beyond God”, Meister Eckhart. It has been said that to be a mystic is to hear the silence behind the music of the world.

The insights of St. Thomas, Karl Barth, Thomas Merton and the mystics help us resist the temptation of creating a God in our own image (someone said that if the world was populated with donkeys, God would be pictured as a donkey). However, theologians have always expressed the real need to say something positive about the concept of God. And so attempts have been made to give some appropriate theological/philosophical designation to God. Some have described God as "Being Itself", "The Ground of Being" or our “Ultimate Concern”. Not perfect, but at least these attempts to speak of God get us away from seeing God as some anthropomorphic figure existing only in a transcendent world beyond human experience and provide an option to an attitude of mystical silence

in the presence of the inexpressible Divine Mystery.

These formulations help us shift our focus and look for God here and now in the fabric of our existence. Without being pantheistic, they point us to God as the ultimate dimension of our own being - a God creatively present in the moments of our everyday lives. They stress God's immanence without denying His transcendence.

All this is not to deny that we can have some real knowledge of God or that we cannot commit our knowledge to words. The Church has done this throughout history in the Scriptures and doctrinal statements. It is rather to warn us that this "knowledge" is not univocal, it is analogous and/or symbolic. Sometimes it can be expressed as metaphor, if we are careful not to take the metaphor too far. And, of course, we really cannot totally escape the use of anthropomorphic language, because this is often the best language available to us, since our humanity is the highest form of being within our experience. And, of course, we must always be aware that our language, concepts and modes of expression are culturally conditioned. *We simply need to be aware of the limits of our knowledge and the poverty of our language.*

And so, in the last analysis, theology is, by definition, an ongoing paradoxical process of trying to do what is ultimately impossible, but necessary for the person of faith -- to speak of the experience and the mystery of God. I say necessary, because one cannot simply pass over in silence the question of God. Our own existence intrinsically involves the question of the nature of ultimate reality.

A Rebirth of Theology - If it is true that we cannot avoid asking the ultimate questions, but that God, the final "referent" of our quest, is ultimately beyond our grasp, then where does this leave us? Is it true that theology can only provide us with a few dry, analogical, doctrinal formulations locked in a "Deposit of Faith" to be believed, but with little real impact on our daily lives? Not at all. Or at least, it need not be. Even though we know that we can never fully articulate our faith in God, theology can and should transform our faith into a redemptive message, a message about ourselves and what it means to be created and loved by God, a message that can fill our everyday lives with new direction, meaning and hope. How can theology do this?

Let me offer two examples which can be most helpful. Each approach in its own way proposes that revelation does not give us information about God and a separate world beyond our experience, but as God's self-revelation it is meant to illuminate the meaning of what it means to be human and to answer the "The Great Questions" which derive from our reflections on being a human in this time and space.

Theology from the Top Down - Maurice Blondel

"Top down" theology is so named because it starts with revelation which is formulated into doctrines (the Deposit of Faith) and then asks us to use this "data" to reflect on the meaning of God. Such theologies have been with us for a long time, but at the turn of the century, a religious philosopher, Maurice Blondel, gave us a new way of looking at these

religious truths or doctrines based on revelation.

Blondel noted that traditionally we had come to think of the doctrines that flowed from revelation as propositions with a clearly defined content, that correspond to a supernatural reality, a supernatural reality in a transcendent world beyond human experience. These truths or doctrines were then to be believed as a condition of our salvation.

Blondel did not find this satisfactory. He asked us to consider doctrinal statements based on revelation from a new perspective. Not as information about God or a world beyond our experience, but as a message about us, others and our world. *Blondel believed that it should be possible to translate every sentence about God into a sentence about human life.*

For example, Blondel acknowledged, with St. Thomas that the revelation by Jesus that God is Father does not reveal much about God. However, if translated into a message about human life it can have redemptive power. For example, if we truly believe God is Father, then by definition, we are sons and daughters and our fellow humans are our brothers and sisters. If we act on this belief, we can be saved from the destructive power of our sins of indifference and hatred. We can experience salvation in our everyday life.

Accepting in faith that God is Father is a revelation, it initiates each of us into a new consciousness of ourselves as sons and daughters. It reveals to us that our destiny, our salvation is to be family. We were created to be at one with God and with each other. It answers one of the Great Questions: Who am I? For Blondel the answer is: I am son or daughter and beloved of my Father. There is no reason to fear that I am alone or the maker of my own destiny. I do not have to create this destiny by my own efforts: it has been given to me. My destiny is to be a child of God, united with Him and His family forever. In faith I acknowledge it.

If I truly believe the revelation that God is Father, I now know that I have worth. I can love myself, not because of the efforts I have made, but because of the free, unmerited gift (grace) of revelation that I am son or daughter, that I am accepted unconditionally by my Father (recall the Prodigal Son). Despite all the evil and suffering in the world, (and my inability to understand it) my faith tells me that God is for me, God is my Father. Despite my failings and the evil I do and the good I omit, I am still beloved. I can always “come home” and be joyfully accepted by my Father. And if this is so with me, it is equally true of every person who has ever lived. Our destiny is the same, we were all created to be the family of the one God. This is the creative will of God.

Imagine what it would be like if we actually tried to live out this revelation in our daily lives? If each of us believed that God is Father, not just intellectually, but in a total commitment that directed every action of our daily lives, surely it would transform the world. In this way our faith would be transformed from an intellectual assent to certain “divine truths”, to a *living faith*, a total human response to the revelation that we are children of God. We now understand in a new way that our work, our family life, our

political life and even our recreation are the places where we come into the presence of our God and can respond to His creative call to love ourselves, each other and all of creation. Thus the moments of our everyday life are seen as rich with the potential for salvation. *This is what it means in everyday life to say that revelation is salvational.*

NOTE: Gregory Baum in his book *Man Becoming*, has called this new way of looking at theological statements, the “Blondelian Shift”. I would encourage anyone to read *Man Becoming*. However, it is well to note that this theological approach is based on only one of five different models of revelation as described by Avery Dulles in his important work, *Models of Revelation*. Dulles describes Blondel’s approach as the “new consciousness” model and sees it as incomplete. However, in my view, Blondel’s approach is the most successful model for us ordinary Christian trying to relate our faith to the experiences of daily life. We must be aware, however, that like all other theological approaches, it is incomplete, provisional and certainly not the final word.

We have briefly described one small segment of Blondel’s theological approach that takes the Good News revealed by Jesus, proclaimed in the apostolic preaching of the NT, formulated in the doctrinal statements of the Church and relates them to everyday human life in such a way as to answer the “The Great Questions” mentioned above.

One critique of Blondel’s approach is that it is a “top down” theology -- that it provides the “answers”, before we necessarily have the questions. It tends to offer a message that is to be accepted or assimilated in faith by the believer. I believe Blondel’s approach does not represent an extreme type of “top down” theology and can be very helpful in relating belief to daily life.

However, a general and valid critique of “top down” theology is that it begins by presenting a set of dogmas (e.g., the Trinity), theological statements and Church doctrines to be accepted in faith by the believer. Revelation is presented as a “strange bundle of truth that fell from Heaven... (having) nothing but answers, and from them it manufactures the questions”. (Carl Armbruster S.J., *The Vision of Paul Tillich*)

Theology from the Bottom Up

There is another effective, but certainly not perfect, approach to the task of linking theology to “The Great Questions”. It asks us to start at the with something within our immediate experience - our human nature. Rather than trying to construct a theology of a God whom we cannot see or directly experience, we can begin our quest for an understanding of both God and human nature from the “bottom up”. For a brief, but highly useful, explanation of this “bottom up” method, I would recommend an article by Macquarrie in *New Theology No. 1* p. 21ff, where he states in the preface:

If man is, as Christianity asserts, a creature of God and dependent on Him, then this should show itself in a study of man. It should be possible to see man as fragmentary and incomplete in himself, so that we are pointed to God; and if we can see man in this way, then we can go on to a fuller

understanding of him in his relation to God....If we can begin from the humanity which we all share, and if we find that this humanity points beyond itself for its completion, then we have, so to speak, indicated the place for the word "God" on the map of meaningful discourse.

Avery Dulles in *A History of Apologetics* (p. 288) emphasizes a caution to those who would defend the faith (apologists) to non-Christians. A caution based on Rahner's conviction that every person is, by definition, open to the experience of God, even though that experience may not be understood in Judeo-Christian terms. To quote Dulles:

To awaken explicit faith, then, one must never present the contents of Christian revelation as an extraneous element foreign to the hearer's personal experience but rather as an interpretation of that which the individual in his depth experience has already encountered through the inner workings of grace. The primary task of the apologist, then, is to exhibit how the whole system of Christian teaching is the one complete answer to the primordial question that man is to himself.

Perhaps the greatest proponent of this kind of "bottom up" theology is the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. His three volume work, *Systematic Theology*, is a brilliant contribution to twentieth century theological thought. For our purposes we will give a brief outline of his "method of correlation"

Paul Tillich -The Method of Correlation

"The method of correlation explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence". (ST vol. 1 p. 60) For Tillich, the "existential questions" are those questions which arise from an analysis of human existence. In our scenario they would include "The Great Questions", which represent our deepest and ultimate concern. The "theological answers" equate to the Christian message which is presented in a way that demonstrates its answers to those questions.

According to Tillich, without the questions first, the answers - Christian preaching (kerygma) and teaching - will fall on deaf ears. This is true because:

God in his self-manifestation to man is dependent on the way man receives his manifestation.... God answers man's questions, and under the impact of God's answers man asks them. Theology formulates the questions implied in human existence, and theology formulates the answers implied in divine self-manifestation under the guidance of the questions implied in human existence. This is a circle which drives man to a point where question and answer are not separated....

The answers implied in the event of revelation are meaningful only in so far as they are in correlation with questions concerning the whole of our existence, with existential questions...

Systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions.(Ibid. p.61-62)

These are important approaches in modern theology (especially Tillich) which I think successfully provide a way of doing theology that can have meaning for us as we reflect on our situation in the world as human beings with a large bag of “Great Questions”. They affirm, whether coming from “the top” or from “below”, that God’s self-manifestation (revelation) is meant to have a direct impact on us here and now, in our daily lives as we try to understand of ourselves, others and the world around us and conduct our lives accordingly.

3. **Scripture and Tradition** -- Earlier we examined the concept of “classic” revelation, but a question remains. If the classic revelation was given at the historical beginning of the faith-community, how does one experience it today and what assurance is there that the original revelation has not been fundamentally distorted in the process of transmission? This leads us to a consideration of Scripture and Tradition. A satisfactory treatment of the nature of Scripture and Tradition and their relationship is impossible here. The subject matter is too vast and the academic skills of the author are certainly too limited. We shall have to be content with a bare outline.

However, before we continue, I think the following comment by Schillebeeckx provides an excellent summary of the relationship of Scripture, Tradition and the teaching authority of the living Church to keep in mind as we treat each subject separately:

It will consequently be clear that I regard as alien to Catholicism both any exclusive assertion of the *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), the *sola traditio* (tradition alone), or the *solum magisterium* (ongoing teaching authority of the Church alone), and similarly any affirmation of two or three parallel and independent sources. Both the scriptures and tradition are necessary to the life of the church. But, on the other hand, scripture and tradition also need the (living) church and each other if they are to be recognized as canonical scriptures and as authentically apostolic tradition.

Scripture

Scripture is not itself revelation, but it is an important way by which the faith-community (the Church) keeps contact with the classic revelation which gave it birth and continues to sustain it. We need to note again the three elements in the process of revelation: 1) reality, 2) experience and 3) interpretation. God is the *reality*, then we have the *experience* of this reality e.g., by Moses and in Jesus, this experience of reality is then

interpreted by committing the experience to words. These words can be oral or written. Scripture is an example of a written interpretation of the experience of God. It goes without saying that no experience of reality and certainly no interpretation of this experience can ever completely do justice to the reality itself (God). So again, Scripture is not itself revelation. It is an interpretation of a revelatory experience.

Thus, Scripture keeps us “in touch” with classical revelation and therefore is a most important factor for all theological thinking. It also provides a partial safeguard against distortions arising from individual excesses and errors in the present. Any Christian theology worthy of that name must keep Scripture as a fundamental datum.

Note: There are a host of issues that could be examined concerning Scripture, e.g. existing manuscripts, development of the canon, history of interpretation, formation of the books, biblical languages, modern biblical criticism, etc.. For our purposes we shall limit our discussion to a brief outline of inspiration, inerrancy and literary forms.

Inspiration -- It is interesting to note that no single book in either the OT or the NT makes the claim that it is inspired. So why do we hold that the entire OT and NT are indeed inspired? The short answer is: the Church declares them to be. While the Scriptures themselves do not make an issue of inspiration and certainly do not contain anything like a “theory of inspiration”, from ancient times the Christian Scriptures, which include the Old Testament and the New Testament, have been considered to be inspired.

In Catholic tradition, the Council of Trent 1545 defined inspiration as a dogma of faith. However, traditional Catholic thought has also maintained that the divine inspiration of Scripture is a supernatural mystery which, by definition, cannot be fully comprehended and will always remain “obscure and opaque to the human mind.” There is an excellent, detailed article entitled *Inspiration and Inerrancy*, by Richard Smith, S.J., found in the St. Jerome Biblical Commentary (1968) pp. 499-514, which will tell you more than you probably want to know about the subject. Smith concludes that currently there is no such thing as *the* Catholic position or anything like a consensus among theologians about the nature and consequences of inspiration.

While there is almost universal agreement on the “fact” of inspiration, there is very little agreement on what it means. The primary basis for the vast library of opinions on the subject is a single text in the New Testament (2 Tim. 3:16):

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, refuting, redressing, and for forming in justice.

In Greek the word “inspired” means “breathing (into)”. The text bypasses the issue of human involvement and seems to indicate that the text itself is inspired. However, there is no indication of how this process takes place, nor what implications flow from such an affirmation. This is the *only place* in either the Old or New Testament that the word “inspired” is used in this sense. Actually, the emphasis of the text is less on the “fact of inspiration” than on the utility of the Scripture for teaching, refuting, etc.. Furthermore, it

is obvious that the Scripture referred to in the text is that of the OT, because, for example, the Gospel of John was probably being written about the same time as Second Timothy and the canon of the NT was yet to be determined and was not accepted as inspired for another 200 years or more and reached final acceptance in the Council of Trent (1545-63).

In emphasizing the inspired character of the text, some important questions about translations naturally arise. The case of the Septuagint (LXX) is especially interesting. The LXX was a translation of the entire OT by Jewish scholars in the last two centuries before Jesus. The LXX was often used in the NT to support its positions and the early Church certainly considered it inspired. However, the translation by definition also implies an interpretation and, furthermore, the LXX contains textual errors and certain misunderstandings of the Hebrew text. For example the LXX mistranslated the Hebrew words *yam sup*, which mean Reed Sea or Sea of Reeds, and rendered them Red Sea. (The movie version would not have been quite so dramatic if the correct translation had been used.) Therefore, while arguments for the inspired character of the LXX remain, the inspired nature of this translation has never been completely settled.

While not using the word “inspired”, a reference to the Holy Spirit and prophesy is found in II Pet. 1:20-21: “ But first note this: no one can interpret any prophecy of Scripture by himself. For it was not through any human whim that men prophesied of old; men they were, but, impelled by the Holy Spirit, they spoke the words of God”. This passage refers to OT prophesy and while it seems to involve human agency, there is no indication of how the process took place or what were its specific implications for the prophet or the text itself.

This seemingly straightforward statement from Second Timothy is actually more complex when we consider how some writings became known as “Scripture”. *It has never been claimed that it is self-evident that the Scriptures were inspired.* In fact, through a long process, it was the Christian community which judged which writings would become part of the canon of Scripture and later deemed inspired.

Not all early writings were judged to be representative enough of the Christian experience to be included in the canon, e.g. the Gospel of St. Thomas. Some were initially accepted into the canon, e.g., The Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas and later rejected. Others were accepted, rejected and accepted again, e.g., The Book of Revelation. Thus it was the living Christian community, the Church, without any certain guides, which defined the official canon of Scriptures, which were in turn considered to be inspired. As noted above, for the Catholic Church this process of defining the official canon of Scriptures was not finally settled until the Council of Trent in the 16th century. Given this process of establishing the Canon of Scripture, the official Church has been careful to point out that it is not the fact of inclusion in the Canon by the Church that makes a book inspired. Inspiration precedes inclusion in the Canon.

Note: I find it fascinating that literally thousands of books and monographs have been written on the concept of inspiration based on this single quote from Second Timothy.

Furthermore, we have reached no definitive conclusion about what inspiration is and how it works. Critics, of course, point to the circular argument flowing from Scripture itself attesting to its own quality of inspiration: In other words, on what grounds do we believe that the statement in Second Timothy about inspiration is itself inspired and therefore useful as a guarantor of its own affirmation?

Popular understandings of the meaning of this quote from Timothy have resulted in a number of different and sometimes contradictory notions of inspiration and in some cases have led to serious distortions in interpreting the meaning of the Scriptures. For example, some fundamentalists will pick up an English translation of the Bible, read several passages without much attention to context, decide what it means to them and then defend this private, non-scholarly, out of context interpretation by saying “its the inspired Word of God”. Just the other day I read a bumper sticker which read: “God said it, I believe it, that settles it”. That pretty well cancels out some 1,900 years of serious biblical scholarship.

Traditionally, the works of the sacred authors are said to be inspired, because if in some way God has “moved” them to write and to accurately communicate, then we can have some guarantee that the scriptural message puts us in touch with “classical revelation”, without fundamental distortion. Thus, Christian tradition has come to call God the author of Scripture and refers to the Scriptures as the Word of God. The expression “Word of God” implies for those with a fundamentalist bent that their English Bible is like a recording of God speaking to the biblical authors, who simply wrote down “God’s words”.

The question of how inspiration takes place and exactly what this implies is an extremely complex one and theories of all types abound. A few words of clarification may help. To begin, let us state what inspiration does not imply. It does not mean that the inspired author becomes some kind of a robot taking divine dictation, so that he makes no conscious contribution, nor that he is simply a secretary taking dictation. There is no miracle about inspiration, because God does not upset the normal process of the author’s activity. The biblical authors wrote as all other writers do and left the marks of their own language, personalities, cultures and scientific and theological assumptions on their writings. For the most part, they were not even conscious that they were inspired. For example, it is hard to imagine that when St. Paul wrote his letter to Philemon, he would have considered it inspired. In fact, Paul would have never dreamed that his letters, often sent to infant churches to address specific difficulties and disputes would still be read two thousand years later and considered the “Word of God”.

Older theories of inspiration were based on certain assumptions that modern biblical study has shown to be defective. These theories assumed that each book of the Bible could be attributed to a single author. We know now that authorship is much more complex. Individual books contain a mixture of different oral and written traditions later compiled and put in written form centuries after the events by writers who are best described as scribes. For example, the authorship of the Pentateuch (the first five books of Bible) was, at one time, attributed to Moses, even though the various traditions which

make up the Pentateuch took their final form hundreds of years after the death of Moses, a period of some 400 years spanning the 10th to the 6th centuries BC. Also, the Gospel of John bears the mark of two authors and the Epistles of John seem to represent different authors, so that we now speak of the Johannine school of authors.

Furthermore, the older notion of “book” tended to be oversimplified. As we noted above, what later appeared as a single book was really a compilation and interpretation of earlier material passed on sometimes for centuries. These materials often represented separate oral and written traditions within the Jewish people. Scholars have identified four major traditions in the OT: The Yahwist (J tradition), the Elohist (E tradition), the Priestly (P Tradition) and the Deuteronomic (D tradition). These traditions were often combined resulting in different accounts or interpretations of similar events e.g., the two creation accounts (J and P) in Genesis. They were presented more like a mosaic, rather than a logical, integrated narrative.

Given these new understandings of “author” and “book”, a question arises: If we are to speak of an inspired author, who is this inspired author and what does he produce? In his book, *Myths and Realities: Studies in Biblical Theology*, Fr. J. L. McKenzie makes the following observation:

...no one thinks that the final and terminal editor is the only inspired author, whoever he may have been...I suggest that the ancient author was anonymous because he did not think of himself as an individual speaker, as the modern author does. He was anonymous because in writing he fulfilled a social function; through him the society of which he was a member wrote its thoughts. He was its spokesman, and the society was the real author of the literature. What he wrote were the traditions of his people...The Bible is the story of the encounter of God and man, but not of God and the individual man...the recital and the profession are the work of no individual writer; the writer writes what his society has communicated to him...

I would insist once more that the spokesman of God speaks not only in virtue of his own personal experience and knowledge of God, but in virtue of the faith and traditions in which his experience occurs and without which his experience would not have meaning.

For McKenzie, the older theories had been too closely identified with the individual author and with the written word. What we have now come to appreciate more fully is the concept of the social character of inspiration. Are we then to assume that all the contributors over hundred of years were individually inspired?

There are, of course, instances where we are certain or fairly certain of an author who composed a specific book, e.g. some of the epistles attributed to St. Paul. Some scholars while accepting McKenzie’s insights point out that while there are indeed many ancient traditions that make up some of the biblical books, certainly there must be granted to the

final author or redactor a certain, unique and creative (perhaps inspired?) contribution in the way these various traditions were selected, assembled and put into final form.

Perhaps the most concise statement about the nature of inspiration is contained in a quote from Pius XII:

For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things “except sin,” so the words of God expressed in human language are made like to human speech in every respect, except error.

So when asked how the words of Scripture can be both divine and human, we can answer: in a way similar to that by which Christ is both man and God -- fully human and fully divine in one person. This does not mean that we understand “how it works”, but that we accept the divine/human nature of the Scriptures as a context within which we strive to understand “that truth which God intended for the sake of our salvation.”

In summary, it seems clear that the Scriptures give no definite “theory of inspiration”, but perhaps we can conclude that through the complex process of creating the inspired Scriptures, the final authors succeed in presenting us with an accurate interpretation of the revelation of God in time and history, the veracity of which is guaranteed by the revelatory experience itself. God does not provide concepts and images for the author in some magical way, but through the experience of and the interpretation of classical revelation and its historical implications the authors (individuals or community) give “inspired” witness within the sphere of their conscious religious declarations through the power of God present within the revelatory experience itself. Thus the inspiration of God respects every element of the authors’ intellectual, moral and cultural make-up and at the same time affects them so decisively that they never cease to be under the influence of the Spirit.

If you find all this a bit confusing, well join the club. However, the issue itself is fundamental in determining the value, use and meaning of the Scriptures and requires further study.

Note: For what it’s worth, it seems to me that the concept of inspiration attempts to convey the belief that the Church, guided by the Spirit in selecting these particular written accounts, has selected an important expression of the living faith of the Church which is judged to represent an authentic (not necessarily complete, definitive or fully developed) expression of an experience of God’s self-communication mediated provisionally through Moses, the prophets, the history of Israel and definitively in the person of Jesus. The Church believes it is able to do this, because its historical, living faith is grounded in the apostolic experience of Jesus which enables the Church to “sense” those messages that are central to that experience. This is what Jesus meant when He said He would leave them, but would send the Spirit, His Spirit, to guide them in the truth. Relying on this continuing presence of Jesus in the living faith of the apostles, now passed on to the Church, the Church wants us to have some assurance that our beliefs based on Scripture are in fact grounded in Scriptures that faithfully

communicate a real encounter with God experienced in Israel and in Jesus.

Inerrancy -- Traditionally, one of the implications which seems to stem from the notion of inspiration is that of inerrancy, as we noted above in the quote from Pius XII. In other words, if the Scriptures can in some sense be viewed as the “Word of God”, it seems to follow that they must not contain error. In my view, the history of the idea of inerrancy shows that the concept has been more of a problem than an asset. The early presumed conflict with science and the Bible is an obvious case in point (the Galileo case). But even in the area of religious matters, a popular notion of inerrancy often gives divine stature to primitive and undeveloped religious ideas.

We now understand that revelation and its communication through Scripture has a history. Revelation is progressive and is communicated through human experience. As such, we cannot expect the same light or understanding in the earlier stages of human experience (OT) as we can find later on. For example, it is only in the second century before Christ that any real notion of personal immortality is asserted. So statements made about life after death, sin, salvation and many more must be judged in this context. Also statements in the Book of Joshua which depict God calling for the annihilation of entire populations of conquered cities, the call for brutal destruction of enemies in the Psalms and the killing of the first born of all the Egyptians by God in the Exodus are indications of a primitive notion of God from an early and incomplete revelational experience.

Cahill in his book, *The Gift of the Jews*, makes the following observations:

There is no way of attributing mass carnage and vindictive slaughter to a God worth believing in. (p. 246)

The story the Hebrew Bible has to tell is the story of an evolving consciousness, a consciousness that went through many stages of development and that, like all living things, sometimes grew slowly and at other times in great spurts

When we say that the Scriptures contain no error, we must be cautious and precise. In an absolute sense error is the affirmation of something that simply does not conform to reality. If this is our working definition of error, then the Scriptures are full of error. For example, the inspired authors stated that the sun rose and they understood this quite literally, as did all thinkers before Galileo. They also envisioned the sky as a fixed vault, the earth as a huge disk resting on pillars, and so on.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Bible communicates without error *that truth which God intended for the sake of our salvation*. When an opinion is given or when a universally accepted idea, even a religious idea, is received as part of the cultural background and assumed rather than taught, then there is no error in the biblical sense. For example, when St. Paul compared Jesus to Adam in Romans, he did not intend to teach that Adam was a historical person, he simply assumed that he was.

Astronomy, science and history in the modern sense are not the data of biblical teaching. The trick is to understand just what “that truth which God intended for the sake of our salvation” happens to be. In any event, this is what we mean by the “literal” sense of Scripture, what the author was trying to convey relative to faith. And to think that we can always easily come to an understanding of this “literal” sense of Scripture by simply reading an English translation of the Bible as one would read a modern novel or modern historical work is mistaken.

It should also be noted that the authors of Scripture did not always have religious teaching as their purpose. Often the purpose was to reach the heart, to console, to charm as seen in many of the Psalms. If there is a sense in which inerrancy is guaranteed by inspiration it can only be when fundamental religious truth is at stake and the formal teaching of religious truth is not always the author’s concern nor are all religious truths of equal value.

For example, the contention in Proverbs 27:15 that: “A continual dripping on a rainy day and a contentious woman are alike;” may or may not be true, but it is hardly a religious truth or a truth that God “intended for the sake of our salvation”.

And, as mentioned above, religious discernment, like revelation, has a history, a history of development from primitive forms to those that are more mature. So exactly when and how do we apply the concept of inerrancy? We have no definitive answer. Part of the answer lies in the function of the living Tradition of the Church which we shall examine later.

In a sense, the word inerrancy is an unfortunate word, much like infallibility. Not that these words are empty of meaning, but throughout history the way they have been understood, especially in the popular mind, has probably have resulted in more misunderstanding than understanding. Perhaps at some time in the future, the truth embedded in the word inerrancy can be formulated in such a way that we can see how the nature of the scriptural message does indeed keep us in touch with the content of classic revelation without causing confusion and a misreading of the divine message.

Final note -- Some people are disturbed by scholars who raise questions about inspiration, inerrancy, interpretation, contradictions in the Bible etc. Many have a simple view that one can just sit down, open the Bible and read a clear, unambiguous message from God. Maybe you can, but not always and less often than you might think. It is instructive to note that in Second Peter, probably the last book written in the New Testament, (cir. 100 AD), it was recognized that the letters of Paul, which we now recognize as Scripture and therefore the “Word of God”, were not that easy to read. It seems the same was true for “other scriptures”. Let us examine 2 Peter 3:15-16:

...So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.

And if the scriptures were often difficult to understand for people in the same culture and using the same language, then we should not be surprised that we, in a culture some two thousand years removed and reading English translations of ancient Greek words and concepts, have trouble understanding and therefore need the help of scholars to unlock the meaning intended by the authors of the Scriptures.

A striking example of how a lack of knowledge of first century culture can result in a modern misconception of the message of Jesus is in the interpretation of Mt. 5:38-41:

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

To the modern ears this sounds like Jesus is promoting pacifism. Indeed, pacifists have used this text to support their views. The “eye for an eye” is a reference to the ancient *lex talionis* or law of retaliation (Ex. 21:23-24; Lv. 24:17-20; Deut. 19:21) . In the OT this was a demand for equal compensation for wrongs done and actually an attempt to limit vengeance and excessive retaliation in an effort to avoid blood feuds. In practice this law actually encouraged monetary compensation rather than actual physical retaliation. It is true that here Jesus rejects the *lex talionis*, He rejects returning violence for violence.

And certainly to our modern ears the rest of the text seems to reject *any* resistance to evil. However, when the culture of the first century is understood, some biblical scholars now interpret this saying of Jesus as actually being a call for resistance to evil, but a non-violent resistance. In other words, Jesus does indeed say not return violence for violence, *but* He does say to turn the other cheek, etc. But how is this to be construed as an act of non-violent resistance?

Imagine yourself standing in front of another person and you want to hit that person on the *right cheek*. This is most easily accomplished by hitting with the *back* of your hand. In the first century, such a blow was inflicted by someone culturally superior to an inferior, e.g. a slave or a wife. It was not the beginning of a fist fight, but meant as an act of humiliation, an insult. (Use of the left hand was culturally restricted for many activities including a simple wave.) Scholars have discovered that in the first century when cultural peers hit one another it was with their fist on the left cheek and when fines were levied for such blows they were of varying degrees for the harm done, but if a peer hit another peer on the right cheek (the back of the hand) the fines were doubled or tripled, because this was a humiliating blow, meant only for inferiors thus adding insult to injury. Certainly not a modern cultural norm.

Therefore, Jesus was saying that if someone hits you on the right cheek, turn the left. In so doing you are saying “you may be able to hit me again, but you must treat me as a peer, an equal and hit me on the left cheek.” This could be a rather dramatic form of non-

violent resistance in the first century cultural setting, which may cost one a beating or perhaps one's life.

Further, Jesus instructs that if the money lenders are asking you for your coat (a long tunic reaching to the ankles and worn close to the body) then give them your cloak also (an outer garment that protected one from the cold and rain which under Jewish law must be returned by the lender at nightfall Ex. 22:25-26). This leaves you naked! It was a culturally shocking way of showing non-violent resistance to the evil done to the poor by the ruthless money lenders who would take even your undergarment if you had nothing else to pledge.

Finally, Roman soldiers could force conquered people within the empire to carry their personal equipment, often weighing 60 to 90 pounds, for one mile, but only one mile. Due to abuses Roman soldiers were often severely penalized for breaking the one mile rule. The suggestion of Jesus to carry an extra mile would put the Roman soldier in the awkward and almost comic position of trying to retrieve his equipment lest he be punished by his superiors. This, again, is a form of non-violent resistance to the presence and demands of the foreign conquerors of the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

So, rather than a call for pacifism or a call to be "Doormats For Jesus", Jesus calls His followers to resist evil in all its forms, but that non-violence is the preferred method. It is clear that in this case and in many others, the lack of understanding the first century culture can greatly hinder us in receiving the life giving message that the Gospels seek to communicate to us.

Literary Forms -- To come to an understanding of the religious message which the author intends to teach, it is extremely important to come to an appreciation of the function of literary forms in which the biblical message is contained. To understand the ancient author, it is necessary to go back wholly in spirit to those remote centuries of the East to ascertain the literary forms (history, poetry, legend, myth, law) and modes of expression (edification, consolation, moral discourse) which the authors of that period were likely to use.

It is also helpful to discern the "situation in life" in which various writings were composed (liturgical settings, edifying discourses, times of community crisis) and to understand the common scientific assumptions operating within the culture of the ancient writer. For example, the OT writers assumed that the earth was a disk, resting on pillars. Rain came down through doors in the dome of the heavens, etc.. They did not teach these as scientific truths, but simply assumed that they were true. When writing the "history" of Abraham they constructed a legend of an ancient ancestor based on fragments of history interlaced with an understanding of God derived from the Exodus, some 400 years after the time of Abraham and written nearly 1,000 years after Abraham.

Note: For many years the official Catholic Church resisted developments in modern scientific, historical and critical methods in the study and interpretation of Scripture. After a great deal of internal discussion, in 1943 Pope Pius XII issued the encyclical

Divino Afflante Spiritu which opened the doors for Catholic biblical scholars to pursue their studies with all the modern tools of interpretation i.e., the study of original languages, archaeology, oral tradition, ancient thought patterns and assumptions, and most importantly the implications of literary forms.

In brief, literary forms are the accepted ways of writing or speaking that are current in a given age or culture. Each form follows its own rules and must be interpreted accordingly. A determination of what the author intends to communicate often demands an understanding of the literary form used. For example, when we mistake myth for science (Genesis) we end up missing the real message, which is theological, and wrongly persecuting the scientist (Galileo). Or when we worry about how Noah could conceivably get two of every known creature on a boat or how he knew the difference between the male and female gnat (a la Bill Cosby), we miss the fundamental theological message that sin is social, its effects are deadly, it can destroy an entire civilization and only God can save us from our sin - an important theological message.

Again, when we mistakenly treat a parable as history we spend time up trying to figure out how Jonah could live for three days in the belly of a whale, while failing to grasp the surprising theological message of the Book of Jonah that salvation is universal, extending even to the enemy (the Assyrians) and that the call of Israel was not directed to them only, but that they were to be a light of revelation to the Gentiles so that the saving power of God would be proclaimed to the ends of the earth.

The following are some of the various types of literary forms that can be found in the Scriptures:

1) Poetry -- Poems can be found in song form as in the entire Book of Psalms or here and there within any of the writings, especially in the writings of the prophets. A type of poetry can comprise a whole book, as in the case of the Book of Job.

2) Parable -- A type of comparison or teaching in symbolic form, using fictional persons and settings, exemplified in the Old Testament by the Book of Jonah and employed many times by Jesus in the New Testament.

3) Poetic prose -- This type of writing can take many forms. It is found as myth in the creation accounts (Gen. 2:4b-3:24), and in the story of the Flood (Gen 6:5-9:17), as fable in the tale of the thistle of Lebanon and the cedar of Lebanon (II Kings 14:9-10) or the trees going out to choose a king (Judges 9:7-15), and as fictional short stories such as the Book of Ruth.

4) Historical tradition -- This category includes legends, where folklore and history meet, as in the stories of Abraham and escapades of Samson (Judged 13-16). It also includes history in the strict sense, as in the court history of David (II Samuel 9-20, I Kings 1-2) which provides us with one of the most important historical writings in the ancient world. This type of writing can also be found in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

5) Law -- The case-law literary form is most evident in Exodus 21:1-23:9

6) Apocalypse -- This is a highly symbolic form of writing quite foreign to modern modes of expression. It is found both in the Old Testament (Daniel) and the New Testament (Revelation and Mark 13 and its parallels). The purpose of this literature was to encourage people in a time of stress and crisis (Roman persecution in NT times). It presents world history as the battle ground of good and evil, with a final triumph of good. The symbols used are often difficult and obscure, but in general they describe not the final events at the end of time, but the current situation at the time of the writing and the message of hope of God's final victory over evil contained in the Good News.

7) Midrash -- Here certain texts of the scriptures are used sometimes in an imaginative reconstruction to give meaning to a present situation. The infancy narrative in Lk 1-2 is considered by some scholars as a good example of midrash; where little genuine recollection of the actual events was preserved, but the narrative is filled with citations from the OT judged as appropriate to the birth of the Messiah. The primary purpose it not to attempt to tell exactly what happened (historically) at the birth of Jesus (Mt and Lk have different versions), but to indicate what His birth signified in light of the OT texts and traditions concerning the Messiah. It addressed the question: Who is Jesus?

8) Wisdom Literature -- In general this literature includes the Books of Job, Proverbs, Canticle of Canticles, Wisdom, Sirach and Ecclesiastes. Wisdom literature generally deals with practical matters of human conduct, aimed at the attainment of well-being in life. It seldom refers to the major OT themes of covenant, election, messianic hope etc.. It is sometimes presented as a human achievement and in other places as ultimately derived from God.

Note: We have used the words *legend* and *myth* as literary forms use in the Scriptures. They probably need some explanation. Most of us understand the term legendary as something which is not historical. In a sense that is true. Legend certainly does not contain "the facts" as demanded by a 20th century notion of history. Legend may indeed concern real, historical people, but the stories about them may be invented, exaggerated or altered to make a point. However, legend has the unique power to communicate a history of the past *as experienced or as seen in depth from a later historical perspective*. And if it is true that our relationship to God is to be seen and experienced in life understood in its deepest meaning, then legend is a powerful way of communicating our "in depth" experiences of life in which we meet God.

The same is true of myth. Myth does not mean simply that something is not true or fictional, but myth is a vehicle for communicating profound theological truths. Just as Jesus used fictional times, places and persons in His parables to communicate profound, salvational truths, so too, myth is a powerful means of communicating profound salvational truths within a non-historic setting. For example, as we shall see later, the creation stories or myths are not intended to give us scientific information about how things got started, but they do communicate to us what God created us to be, i.e., people

who love themselves, others and the world. And insofar as we actualize that kind of love in our lives, we become one with God and find our true selves. Unlike scientific facts, the messages of myths can be salvational by opening the doors to reality seen “in depth” where the presence of God can be revealed.

The purpose of myth is not to explain the past, but to understand the present. The creation myths used in Genesis seek to explain why there is sin and evil *now*, why we are alienated from self, others, nature and God *now*. Myths are meant to illumine our present existence with its eternal questions of ultimate meaning.

The fact that the OT writers used myths to express their religious experiences, does not mean that the faith of Israel was based on myth. The Israelites produced no mythology of their own. Unlike pagan religions based on myth, their faith was based on an experience of God within their particular history. Myths were borrowed from other cultures and revamped to express their unique experience of God.

In summary, if we are to depend on Scripture to provide us a link with classical revelation of the past, we must be able to understand as accurately as possible *what it is that the sacred authors wished to convey*. But how, in fact, do we know what it is that the sacred authors wanted to convey? Or from another perspective, how do we know what God “put into” Sacred Scriptures for our salvation? Like life, it’s difficult.

Two answers or approaches to this question, both assuming assistance from the Holy Spirit, have been operative in Christianity. The first, private interpretation of the (guided by the Holy Spirit), found in the Epistles of John has generally been identified with Protestantism. This approach has logical and practical difficulties when two “Spirit guided” Christians or 400 “Spirit guided” Christian denominations disagree on important scriptural texts.

The second, identified with the Roman Catholic Church, depends on interpretation from the “Spirit guided” teaching authority of the Church. However, as Raymond Brown points out in *An Introduction to the New Testament*:

Roman Catholics who appeal explicitly to Spirit-guided church teaching are often unaware that their church has seldom if ever definitively pronounced on the literal meaning of a passage of Scripture, i.e., what an author meant when he wrote it.

Maybe, after all, it can be said that the Spirit leads us to the task of doing the difficult scholarship required to give us an understanding of the true theological message which the sacred authors wanted to convey. In this task we are assisted by the concepts of inspiration and inerrancy and the decoding tools of literary forms, archeology, the study of ancient language, culture and thought patterns. *Our response to the Spirit is to use all human means possible, including prayer, as we attempt to understand the message of the Scriptures.*

Using these tools for understand the Scriptures we can in some real way enter into the mind of the author(s). For example, though there is indeed some history (in the modern sense) in the Scriptures, the intention of the authors is not to relate events as we would today capture them on video tape, but most often to explain the *significance* of the event in the light of faith e.g., the infancy narratives do not intend to tell us what happened at the birth of Jesus, but what His birth *signified*; not how He was born, but *who He is*, especially in light of the OT.

Another example, we now know that the message of the first chapters of Genesis was not to provide us with an inspired, inerrant scientific description of how the world began, but rather a powerful theological message about the human condition and the God Who is the creator of all that exists. We know this because we understand the literary form (myth) and the implications of inspiration (theological message) and inerrancy (theological judgments) in this type of literature.

So is it required that we all have to be scripture scholars to pick up the Bible and encounter the divine message? No, there is much in Sacred Scripture that is clear and speaks to the heart. It is certainly not necessary to be a biblical scholar to understand and be moved by the parable of the Prodigal Son. However, there are many instances in our personal encounters with the Scriptures and especially when we use Scripture as a fundamental datum in the development and the evaluation of our theological efforts, that we would do well to rely on the work of modern biblical scholarship to help us discover the “Word of God in the words of men”.

Jerry Korschmeier provides a similar summation of Vatican II’s understanding of Scripture as a mediator of divine revelation in his book *Evolution and Eden*:

For if God uses human beings as channels through which to make divine purposes known, this means that revelation comes to us cloaked in the symbols of human experience, conformed to the limitations of human language, and shaped by human knowledge of the world. Therefore, what the authors of Scripture were inspired to write were human stories, histories, poetry and prose, sagas, legends, myths and laws, which contain that which God wishes them to contain for the purpose of our salvation. We recognize these words as the Word of God because, when they are read in faith, we experience the divine presence revealing itself to us in ways that we can understand.

The extent of our understanding of the revealed content of Scripture is limited by our understanding of the human writing in which it is transmitted. We need to understand the meaning of the words, the idioms used during the eras of the writers, the customs of the people, the level of scientific knowledge they had, and the current myths and stories used in their time to explain the world in which they lived. Without these things we can still understand something of Scripture, but we are severely handicapped and open to misunderstandings, often deceived into thinking

that the books provide ready answers to all the problems of life.

Tradition

There has been a long and confusing argument between Catholics and Protestants about the relationship of Scripture and Tradition and their function in giving witness to revelation. In the past, Catholics had argued that the revelation in Jesus has been transmitted down the ages through two parallel sources, Scripture and Tradition. Protestants acknowledged Scripture alone as the source of revelation.

A change in these theological assertions has occurred in modern times due to a recognition that the earlier understanding of revelation, sources, Tradition and Scripture was inadequate. A theological history of this process is not possible here, but an attempt will be made to sketch the developing consensus.

Modern discussions of Scripture and Tradition usually begin with a treatment of revelation. In an important sense, neither Scripture nor Tradition are revelation in themselves nor do they “contain” all of revelation nor is everything in Scripture or Tradition designated as revelation. It is simply not possible to “contain” revelation, if revelation is understood, not as a specific number of “truths” revealed by God to be believed as a condition of salvation, but as the self-communication of God through which we come to a new understanding of ourselves and God. The evangelist John was speaking quite literally when he said all the books in the world could not describe the person and meaning of Jesus (Jn 21:25).

The experience of the followers of Jesus is called the “classic” Christian revelation, i.e. the personal experience of Jesus, and as such is the normative experience for the Christian community throughout history. When it came time for the early Christian community to give witness in writing to this experience of Jesus, the inspired authors expressed the testimony of faith handed on (tradition) from the apostles which we call the New Testament.

It is important to note that the Christian Scriptures arose within the early Church and were the expression of its living faith. *Thus, living Tradition gave birth to the Scriptures.* And it was the Church which eventually decided which of the great variety of early writings were indeed inspired (the canon) and this judgment was made on the basis of how accurately these writings mirrored the living faith and traditions of the Church.

Because this living Tradition was apostolic, the writings, which were selected because of their faithful witness to that tradition, became the norm for all future ages of the Church, an objective norm beyond which and outside of which the Church could never go. True, the Scriptures became the norm and in a way the foundation of the Church, but it was precisely because there was a Church, living and teaching, that this norm itself was established.

It is important to remember the dialectic process that takes place here: 1) the experience

of “classic” revelation (Jesus), 2) the interpretation and expression of this experience in writing (scripture), 3) the selection by the Church from among these written expressions as core representations of the faith (canon of scripture), 4) the ongoing reliance of the Church on the canon of scripture to maintain itself in the faith. *The dialectic is this: the Church gives birth to the scriptures and is subsequently formed and sustained by these same scriptures.*

Peter Berger in his book “The Sacred Canopy” (p.4), explains this same kind of dialectic process that takes place in human society which he describes society in three stages or moments -- *externalization, objectivation, and internalization*. First, society is a human creation (externalization of human activity), then society becomes a “thing-in-itself” (objectivation of human activity as laws, customs, values, etc.) and finally human beings become products of the very society they have created (internalization).

By analogy, the same thing happens when the experience of revelation is expressed in writing (externalization), these writings then become an approved body or canon of writings called scripture (objectivation) and then these scriptures continue to mold the faith of believers throughout history (internalization).

To sum up, there is only one source of revelation -- God’s self-communication. The living Tradition of the Church, which gave birth to the Scriptures and which continues today by preaching, teaching and praying, gives authentic witness to the experience of revelation within the Jewish/Christian tradition, without ever exhausting its mystery. The function of a living Tradition is not merely to accurately recall the past, but to make revelation alive in the Church today. We are not exclusively a religion of “The Book”, we believe that God becomes present to us in many ways today, e.g. in the workings of the Holy Spirit, in nature, prayer, the sacraments, the daily experience of our lives and the lives of others, in the research and writings of theologians, in teachings of the Church and, importantly, but not exclusively in the Scriptures.

Sometimes there are those who break with Tradition, either in the name of being modern or for the sake of going “back to the Bible”, as if all intervening development could be laid aside. Tradition is meant to guard against this, for Scripture needs the complement of Tradition to protect against the possible distortion that individual interpretation can create, for almost anything can be read into the Scriptures. And the living Tradition of the Church today needs to reformulate and/or authenticate the older Tradition of the Church so that the true Gospel message comes through.

Christian theology, if it is going to remain Christian, can no more ignore Tradition than it can Scripture, for it is the promise of Jesus that the Holy Spirit sent by Him to ground the Church in the truth is to be present throughout history and not merely in apostolic times. Some of the ways in which the Spirit guides the Church in truth will be discussed in the section on Authority in the Church.

4. Language -- At the first the concept of language seems relatively simple. Certainly we all know that we use language, verbal and written, to communicate. We use language

to communicate in many areas of human interaction, but in the area of theology we use language to communicate our faith. As we noted above, when we subject our faith to expression, it is then when we theologize and make statements of belief. These statements of belief are expressed in a variety of ways, including creedal statements, articles of faith, professions of faith, statements of popes and councils, the liturgy, our individual ways of talking about what we believe etc.. *All of these statements of faith are communicated through human language in the form of propositions.*

Propositional Language

We noted before in speaking of revelation that we must avoid the misconception that the content of revelation is a set of propositional truths clearly set out to be accepted in faith. We also noted that revelation is best understood as the “self-communication of God”. However, if God is by definition “not a being” and thus not an object, then God’s self-communication (revelation) cannot be adequately and certainly not definitively expressed within the limits of human language. So we have a problem. How do we or how can we speak of God?

We who believe that God has indeed revealed Himself to us, (e.g. in creation, through Moses, and in Jesus) must deal with the reality that if such revelation cannot be expressed in words then it would be impossible to communicate such revelation to others. If Moses did not have the ability to share (and to share in words) his revelatory experience there would never have been an Israelite people.

So, even though we must be aware of the inadequacy of language, its symbolic character and its cultural conditioning, nevertheless we cannot escape the fact that human language, for all its limitations, is still our best way of communicating. And revelation, if it has any meaning at all, presupposes that something is revealed -- understood in some way -- and thus capable of being shared with others.

Perhaps the human experience of “falling in love” provides us some analogous comparison. Certainly the experience of falling in love is real and yet how can anyone adequately describe in words the experience of “knowing” the other in this experience. This is not the stuff of simple sentences. This is the stuff of poetry, of tears of joy, of a racing heart at the sight of the beloved. This is knowledge of another that quite literally is beyond words, but real nevertheless. And the poetry of love, while unending and inadequate, is nevertheless real and certainly not unimportant.

This may all seem like so much theological and philosophical “double-talk”, but it is important for us to realize the mysterious nature of God’s revelation and our puny attempts of understanding of it. We need a large dose of theological humility to help us resist the temptation to think that we can “capture” God in our attempts to describe His presence, a presence which we believe He has made known to us. *It is God who grasps us, not we who grasp God.* I believe it was Chesterton who said that it is appropriate “to put our heads in the heavens, if we do not believe that we can get the heavens into our heads.”

Having said all this, we certainly do not deny that theological propositions can and do communicate truth, or conform in some way to the reality they claim to express, nevertheless it is also true that propositions, even those expressing our faith, participate in the problematic of human propositions in general. Linguistic philosophers have made us aware that the concept of language and its ability to communicate is not as simple as we might suppose. The following observations summarize what linguistic philosophers see as the problematic inherent in propositions as such (adapted from *Infallible?, An Inquiry*, by Hans Kung):

1) Propositions fall short of reality -- We can never totally capture reality, especially the reality of God, in a proposition. We spoke above of the impossibility of making a statement about God except symbolically or by analogy of proper proportionality. There is always a difference between what we want to state and what we do state, between our intention and our spoken word, between the reality and our expression of it.

2) Propositions are open to misunderstanding -- Words have different, often ambiguous meanings. Anyone who has been married more than an hour knows that often what you thought you said was largely or totally misunderstood by your spouse. We make assumptions, leave something unsaid and often speak in our own technical or cultural jargon. Those who receive our communication may have prejudgments about what we are going to say and make judgments about what we “really” are saying.

3) Propositions can be translated only up to a point -- In every language there are words that defy translation. Often two words with different meanings can only be translated by one word in another language. In the NT there are two Greek words used quite often, which have quite different meanings, but are translated into English by the single word *love*, e.g. *phileo* and *agape*. So in practice every translation of the Bible always involves an interpretation. This is also true in the formulations of doctrine. In the Council of Chalcedon, the Greek word *hypostasis* was used to denote “person” in its definition of Jesus as one person with two natures. However, Lampe’s *Dictionary of Patristic Greek* requires no less than fourteen columns to list the various meanings and usage of the word *hypostasis*. Sometimes single words can require paraphrasing to communicate meaning. For theological statements meant for a universal audience, this can create a significant problem at times.

4) Propositions are not static -- Language is a living entity. Words change their meaning throughout time. When the Trinity was defined as three “persons”, the concept of person used in the formulations was different from the modern concept of person as a distinct “center of consciousness.” In the third century, when Tertullian introduced the Latin word *persona* (translated into English as person) to translate the Greek word *hypostasis*, in common language the term *persona* referred to a mask worn by Roman actors. Actors wore different masks to indicate which characters they were playing. Most scholars assume that Tertullian was trying to express that, in an analogous way, the one God played different roles in the history of salvation. This “explanation” is not sufficient, but it shows how the meaning of a word can change over time.

In any event, in modern times the term person has come to denote an individual center of consciousness. Certainly the notion of three centers of consciousness in the Trinity is not what was intended in the original formulation. In fact to assert three centers of consciousness is to fall into the heresy of tritheism (three Gods). As Karl Rahner states in his book *Trinity*: “There can be no doubt about it: speaking of three persons in God entails almost inevitably the danger...of believing that there exist in God three distinct consciousnesses, spiritual vitalities, centers of activity, and so on.” Therefore, it is important to be aware that *when the same word or phrasing is simply repeated throughout the centuries, the meaning of the original message can change.*

The historical context of language and propositions

It is well to remember that doctrinal statements or propositions are theology and not faith. Faith is a gift from God, theology is fallible human reasoning about faith. It is interesting that while we in the Church have shifted from a biblical fundamentalism to a more critical approach to Sacred Scripture, there has been little effort to escape from our doctrinal fundamentalism. For example, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* published in 1994 lists over 75 references to the Council of Trent (1545) without attempting to examine its language or the influence of the philosophy of the time; without attempting to set the doctrinal statements in their historical context; without attempting to determine the level of authority for statements quoted, indicate a level of relative importance of each doctrine or attempting to recast or situate the doctrinal propositions within current theological thought.

There are, however, some very definite and hopeful signs of change within the official teaching authority of the Church. In 1973, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a document entitled *Mysterium Ecclesiae* which stated:

- (1) The meaning of faith pronouncements “depends partly on the power of language used at a certain...time”;
- (2) “Some dogmatic truth is at first expressed incompletely (but not falsely) and later...receives a fuller and more perfect expression”;
- (3) Pronouncements usually have a limited intention “of solving certain questions or removing certain errors”;
- (4) The truths being taught “may be enunciated in terms that bear the traces” of “the changeable conceptions of a given epoch” and may need to be reformulated by the teaching church to present more clearly their meaning.

Understanding propositions as symbolic

Given these caveats about doctrinal propositions, Gregory Baum proposed a more radical approach to doctrinal propositions in an article written many years ago entitled *Propositions Are Not Salvational - Symbols Shall Set You Free*. (NCR) In this article he questions the value of highly rational doctrinal propositions (infallible or not) in making people aware of the divine dimension present in the ordinary experiences of their lives. The question is of fundamental importance: Do these doctrinal propositions have the

power to transform our lives? In other words, are such propositions *salvational* and if not is there a better way of proclaiming the Good News? The issue is not simply truth, but the redemptive meaning and power available in the vehicles we use in proclaiming the Gospel.

Baum, (following Blondel, discussed earlier), makes an excellent point. He asks the question: “Are we definitively tied to the entire doctrinal tradition of the past, or can the church liberate herself from this and return to a more simple, direct, imaginative and concrete way of proclaiming the Good News?” Certainly this is not without precedent. As we mentioned above in our comments about inculturation, early in the history of the Church, St. Paul and others had to adapt the presentation of the Good News for gentiles living in a Greek culture, while maintaining a Jewish reference base to help explain the person and mission of Jesus to the Jews.

In the highly rational tradition of the past, we tended to think of doctrines as propositions with a clearly defined content, that simply corresponded in some way to a supernatural reality beyond human experience. But for doctrine to be salvational, it must reveal our relationship to the deepest dimensions of our lives. In other words, God’s presence in human life must be fully acknowledged in such a way that our relationship to God is not a relationship to a Being, however supreme, existing outside of ourselves and above history, but a relationship to a sacred mystery present in our history and operative in our everyday lives. Doctrine, from this point of view, brings out this hidden relationship to the deepest dimension of our life. *If doctrine does not relate to our ordinary lives it becomes marginal and unimportant with no power to be salvational for us.*

If it is true that our relationship to God cannot be fully conceptualized and put into doctrinal propositions, then how can we speak of it. An answer for Baum is through symbols.

If doctrine is understood as symbolic, then we might be able to free ourselves from certain doctrinal positions developed in the church due to highly rational preoccupations. If doctrine is symbolic, then the main question is not whether it is infallible or not. What counts, then, is not the intellectual assimilation of new concepts, but rather the integration of the symbolic in the imagination so that we experience the whole of life in terms of them.

In this perspective, Christian teaching is not the communication of a conceptual system, but the initiation into a way of seeing the world, of experiencing life, of responding to challenges, of hoping in the future. The symbols God has revealed in Jesus might fill the minds and the imagination of people in such a way that they experience the whole of life in the light of Christ.

For example, St. John speaks of the second person of the Trinity as the Word. To see this statement non-symbolically, is to say that it is somehow an objective statement about

God. It is difficult to see how such an “objective” statement is salvational.

However, when we say that “God is Word” is a symbolic statement we affirm something quite different. Unlike a sign, which merely points beyond itself and has no necessary relationship to that which it points, a symbol implies a two-way participation. This means the symbol, “God is Word”, actually participates in the reality of God, which means that God is One Who speaks to us. God is not the silent, uninvolved “first cause” of Greek philosophy.

How, in fact, can we experience God “speaking” to us? This can take place in what Baum describes as “universal human depth-experiences”. These include, for example, our experience of conscience - our search to do good and avoid evil; our experience of human solidarity - an awareness of our membership in the human family and our obligations to that family; our experience of truth - our need to know what is true about ourselves and our world; our experience of contingency - a fundamental awareness that we are dependent on Someone other than ourselves for our existence.

To complete the two-way participation, we humans also actively participate in the symbol. Because if we accept in faith that God is Word, then we understand ourselves to be listeners. We become actively open to God Who communicates Himself to us in the moments of our ordinary life activities. We now become searchers, searching out the mystery of the God, the ground of our being, Who speaks to us. We now look for opportunities to respond to the Word that calls us to love ourselves, others and the world everyday of our lives e.g. we support Habitat for Humanity, visit a shut-in, collect food for the poor, serve as a local politician, start a business to meet a human need, host a family reunion, take care of our health, etc.. It is in such things that we find our salvation.

This is what Baum means when he says doctrines taken symbolically now have the power to help us see life and our part in it in a new way. These symbols (doctrines) have the power to change our lives - they are salvational.

Conclusions

From this we can, at least, conclude that language, especially language used in faith propositions, can be a faithful servant or a poor servant for theologians and the Church as teacher. Doctrines, dogmas, authoritative teachings of bishops and popes do have some real value in setting the limits for statements of belief and preserving the Church (and its theologians) from fundamental error.

Furthermore, those in positions of teaching authority cannot accept any and all theological notions that come from theologians, but neither can they reject any and all of these theological notions. To do the former would allow heresies full reign and give lie to the Gospel message, to do the latter would prevent us from making progress in understanding the great mystery of God and His revelation. (Someone remarked that it is preferable to have one infallible pope, than a thousand “infallible” theologians.) I firmly

believe, that, understood correctly, the magisterium of the Church needs to provide a “conservative” center to test out new theologies and statements of belief. This is one of the functions of the living Tradition of the Church. This is not an easy task.

However, by conservative I do not mean reactionary. Those who hold teaching offices in the Church must also be attentive listeners. *The Spirit of Truth was a gift to the entire Church*. The Vat. II Constitution on the Church (n. 12) teaches that the “body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy one, cannot err in matters of belief”.

Based on John’s Gospel, the Church has long recognized the gift of a “sense of faith” (*sensus fidei*) which resides in each individual member and the Church as a whole. This “sense of faith” is an intuition or instinctive knowledge of God which is given in the act of faith and sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus all members of the Church should be consulted in matters of understanding and formulating the faith. On the other hand, the Gospel of Matthew notes that it is often necessary for leaders in the Church discern which “spirits” speak the truth.

Those in positions of teaching authority face a daunting task. Popes and bishops, with the gifts and duty of teachers, do not receive any special theological insight through the rite of consecration. They too must set themselves to the difficult task of theology. In the exercise of this task, they must remember that theologians and the laity as a whole also play an important role in the exercise of the Church’s mission to teach and preach the Good News.

Unfortunately, bishops (including the pope) are often cast as the official teachers (the magisterium) who are set off from the theologians and laity as the proclaimers and guardians of religious truth. Theologians are often considered a “pesky lot” stirring up new and often dangerous ideas, while the laity are functionally ignored as contributors to theological matters - they are to listen and submit to their official teachers.

Such a scenario ignores the obvious fact that every single theological idea in the possession of a bishop came from someone of the laity and/or from theologians. Obviously, the most fundamental teachers of theology are parents and their “support staff” in the Catholic schools or the CCD programs. It is in these childhood years that we all absorb our faith. Subsequently, in the eight years plus of seminary training, future bishops are the students of certain theologians - biblical, historical, dogmatic, moral, etc.. Without the laity and professional theologians, bishops would exist in a theological void.

Our bishops, as official teachers, also need to understand that doctrines, dogmas and papal statements must constantly be reexamined to make sure they still communicate the same message they meant to convey at their inception and to consider whether they need to be corrected or given new interpretation to meet questions that confront us in the present time. To think that we can adequately and for all time capture the mysteries of God in our words and phrases, even “infallible” statements, is a fundamental misconception. This leads to a look at the concept of “mystery”.

5. **The Concept of Mystery-** In grade school and high school and even later in the seminary, when someone in the class would ask a difficult question about predestination, the resurrection, why Jesus had to die for our sins or some other difficult topic, many times the instructor would simply reply that "this is a mystery". It was a signal that no further questions should be asked. It probably was also a sign that the instructor had reached the limits of his or her knowledge.

But it left the impression that labeling something a "mystery" meant that we had come up against an intellectual wall and that nothing further could be learned. Consequently the subject was to be mentally consigned, without further comment, to a long list of other such mysteries to be humbly held "on faith".

In my view, the word mystery implies just the opposite. It means that there are *infinite* possibilities for understanding. Chet Raymo my classmate at Notre Dame put it this way:

Knowledge is an island in the sea of mystery. Increasing the size of the island does not deplete the sea; rather it increases the length of the shoreline along which we might encounter mystery. (Chet Raymo "The Eye of the Beholder" Notre Dame Magazine Spring 2002, p. 23).

The more we know, the more we realize there is to know. It may be true, that at the end of our intellectual journey, the vistas of the mystery of God become so wide that we may very well end up on our knees with the great mystics, unable to utter a word, reduced to silent adoration. But this is so not because there is nothing more to understand, but because we realize that *there is too much to understand*.

So when we say that our faith is ultimately based on mystery, we mean that we who consider ourselves believers, are always on a journey of faith. As individuals and as a community we can and should expect an ongoing maturing of our understanding of the mystery of God's presence in our lives. We can expect that the older formulas of belief, that may have been adequate at an early stage of our individual and community history, must be replaced by newer ones that reflect our true progress in our journey of faith. Of course, there will be mistakes along the way -- even a few heresies -- but that is to be expected and is the price of our maturing in faith as we explore its mysteries.

If I ever had an original thought it is this: In my view, one of the fundamental tasks of theology, the task it is best equipped to do and the task that is most helpful for ordinary believers is this: *To place the mystery*. By this I mean, to present the mysteries of faith in such a way, that to believe them does not contradict reason and lead us to unbelief.

For centuries the Church has taught that there can be no real conflict between faith and reason. By definition, faith is not *rational*, but it is *reasonable*. For example, when we say that faith is reasonable, we mean that it is not absurd or contrary to reason to hold that Jesus is the ultimate manifestation of God. However, faith is not rational in the sense that it can be proven by reason alone or that it can be reduced to natural knowledge and

recognized as true by any right thinking human being. We hold that faith is a gift. Therefore, it is not the task of theology to make the faith totally rational (which is impossible), but to “place” the mysteries of faith in contexts which are credible, not incredible. Let me give you a real life example.

A number of years ago, I had an office in the same building with a young man who had a devastating experience. He was at home working on his car. He had it jacked up in his garage to work on something. It happened that his three year old daughter came into the garage to see him. As she neared the car, the jack slipped, the car fell and his daughter was crushed to death.

I never knew what his minister or friends said to comfort him, but I do know that loving, faith-filled Christian people often try to explain or "place the mystery" of such happenings in something like these terms: "We don't know why God called your daughter at this time, but I can assure you He had a good reason. We may not understand it now, because God's ways are not our ways. Later in heaven we will see how this was part of His divine plan".

Only the uninvolved could accept such a theological scenario. In my view, we do a terrible disservice to ask the father of this child to accept the “mystery” of a God Who would have a good reason to do such a thing. Certainly the death of this child is a mystery. But to *"place the mystery"* in terms of a God Who has divinely ordained this death as part of a divine plan, is something I cannot believe and should not ask others to believe.

Can we really ask people to believe that such things as the Holocaust, the murder of millions of Russians by Stalin, the AIDS epidemic, the Irish famine, the abuse and neglect of million of babies by their parents and other such atrocities are actually part of some “divine plan” which will be revealed to us in all its glory in Heaven? To me this is beyond imagination.

This is not the God that we see revealed in Jesus. The God in Jesus is absolutely against evil. Does this answer resolve the mystery of evil? No, but it frees us to place the mystery in another context. That context may be God within an evolutionary perspective, rather than in the confines of Greek philosophy.

Modern science, linked with modern theology, has made it clear that the created world is, by definition, a world that is imperfect. Only God the creator is perfect. Because creation is imperfect it “bumps into itself”, it wears down and breaks apart -- thus we experience natural evil. Studies in evolution reveal that living organisms are selfish by nature in order to survive and humans inherit this selfishness which is the root of what theologians call sin. These selfish tendencies, when unchecked by human freedom, result in sin that can cause suffering and death to self and others. As part of a created universe humans also wear down and eventually die. Suffering and death are inevitable properties of created life.

God does not plan evil, but there can be no creation without the presence of evil. And so we modern Christians have perhaps encountered a God who has a “divine vision”, rather than a “divine plan”, a God intimately involved with us in our becoming, which of necessity includes our suffering and growth. A God who becomes present to us to give and sustain life. A God of promise and hope.

In conclusion

We said at the beginning of this chapter that, upon human reflection, reality presents itself to us as a mystery. “The Great Questions” of life emerge from this mystery. We also said that we who have faith believe that there are answers to our questions -- that the answers come from outside ourselves and “break in” to our lives. We believe that these answers come as a gift, as a grace from an Other whom we call God.

Perhaps it is obvious, but it needs to be said, that the “answers” which we believe come to us in the history of the Jewish people and in the person of Jesus are in themselves *mystery* and an evolving mystery at that. The true humanity of Jesus could no more contain or fully express His divinity, than our impoverished language, whether in Scripture or doctrines, (infallible or not), can express the “answers” to the Great Questions of life contained in what we call revelation. With God’s help we can only continue on our intellectual journey into the mystery of our existence. And as for our puny attempts to speak of this mystery, we might acknowledge that this is serious business, but not take ourselves too seriously.

We have come full cycle, from questions about the mysteries of life, to an acknowledgment that in the end we are left with mystery. So let us end where we began:

In faith, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, love. (St. Augustine)

The substance of the ancient doctrines of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. (Opening address of John XXIII to Vatican II)

The business of theology is not to solve problems but to illumine mysteries that become all the more mysterious when so illumined. (Michael Dodds O.P.)

AMEN