

## Revelation, Traditions and the Liturgy

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The aim of my paper is to give you an overview of the inter-relation of the three themes of *Revelation, Tradition and the Liturgy*.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. The idea of revelation

In a largely secular society, the very idea of thinking and acting *dependent on revelation* easily becomes inaccessible. In the contemporary Church as found in the countries of the North Atlantic civilisation, the historic homelands of secularism, the notion of revelation often eludes the grasp of Christians themselves, unless a serious doctrinal effort is made to affirm and explore it.<sup>3</sup>

Revelation has two presuppositions that are altogether basic.<sup>4</sup>

*First*, the world around us is endowed with a capacity to be ‘iconic’: to image or echo its divine Creator. That ability of the created order – whether as a whole or under some aspect or in some particular instance – to point to its divine source is the basis for ‘natural revelation’, the disclosure of God in created being that underlies the world religions in different ways, as well as in myth and literature, dream motifs and art. Over and above this, it belongs to the Creator to be able to enhance the iconic potential of things in such a fashion as to serve a saving design for the repair and consummation of the creation – to act as vehicles for the ‘second gift’ of salvation which is to make good and *more than make good, to take beyond itself*, the ‘first gift’ of the world’s created being.

But then *secondly*, man – the human animal – must be able to interpret aright the revelatory force of things (no ‘disclosure’ can be successful until it finds its recipient). In the case of humanity after the Fall, with our darkened and error-prone (though still truth-directed) intellect and our distorted and weak (though still goodness-seeking) will, that interpretative work needs the help of divine grace even with regard to natural revelation. But with supernatural revelation, it follows from

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<sup>1</sup> Lecture given at the seventh CIEL colloquium, 8–10 November 2001, in Versailles.

<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of the opening dogmatic sections of this paper appeared in A. Nichols, O. P., *Come to the Father: An Invitation to Share the Catholic Faith* (London 2000), pp. 21-35.

<sup>3</sup> See A. Nichols, O. P., ‘Reviving Doctrinal Consciousness’, in idem., *Christendom Awake. On Re-energising the Church in Culture* (Edinburgh 1999), pp. 41-52.

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller account of revelation and its presuppositions, see (on the presuppositions) A. Nichols, O. P., *The Shape of Catholic Theology. An Introduction to its Sources, Principles, and History* (Edinburgh 1991), pp. 74-78, and (on the nature of revelation itself), idem., *Epiphany. A Theological Introduction to Catholicism* (Collegetown, Minn., 1996), pp. 30-33.

the nature of the case – from the kind of divine activity involved – that the human person could not scan aright its epiphanies in the experience of prophets and apostles, nor grasp correctly the lessons those epiphanies contain, unless our natural human powers of knowing and willing, thinking and loving, were supernaturally energised, were raised up into a new order of activity that corresponds to the purpose of God in his saving self-disclosure.

What makes revelation possible from the side of God? Here also there are two principal presuppositions we must mention. *First*, as the philosophy of religion can tell us – at least when providentially steadied in its intellectual gaze and thus sharpened in its argumentative focus – there must be in God a communicative freedom analogous to, though infinitely exceeding, that ability to disclose our purposes and so the direction of our personalities which characterises the (microscopic) spiritual beings we ourselves are. As the creative Archetype of those gifts God must enjoy a liberty in self-communication of which our experience, as creatures that live by language and friendship, is only the dimmest reflection.

But *secondly* – and here only the biblical proclamation, as found in the Church’s apostolic rule of faith, can serve our turn – revelation from the side of God is only possible if in fact God *desires* us as his conversation-partners, desires, indeed, to share his life with us. It is the faith of the Church that the God who is from all eternity a living Act of self-communication (Father to Son in the Holy Spirit) has elected to share with human beings the knowledge and love he has of himself in his own triune life, with a view to not only healing our corruption but bringing us to Glory.

Revelation is, then, a wonderful conspiracy of created potential with the divine will. By light, light, said the Jewish sage Philo of Alexandria,<sup>5</sup> and the disclosure of the one who is ‘Light from Light’ as Jesus Christ intensifies that illumination. The light of revelation is, we can say, not only a ‘Thaboric’ light, shining on our senses through epiphanies in the incarnate order (the paradigm here is the radiance of the face and raiment of Christ as he was transfigured on a mountain – ‘Thabor’ – in the sight of his disciples). It is also an intellectual light that shines from within (our Creator is more intimately present to us than we to ourselves), enlightening our understanding, inflaming our will.<sup>6</sup>

Our current difficulty in grasping what ‘revelation’ may be derives from the institutionalised intellectual pride of the post-Renaissance Western cultural tradition. Much of the intellectual and

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<sup>5</sup> E. R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven 1935).

<sup>6</sup> That revelation is both of these at once, but first and foremost light that breaks from the revelatory forms themselves, is the chief contention of the first volume of H. U. von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics: see idem., *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik*, I. *Schau der Gestalt* (Einsiedeln 1961), and especially pp. 123-210.

cultural leadership of early modern and modern Europe set out to close the minds of those they influenced to penetration by the light of revelation, a light whose transcendence requires, uncomfortably, the intellect's submission. That sin of intellectual pride – taken with full seriousness by the spiritual masters (it is a plausible explanation of the Fall of the angels) – became embodied in educational and civil institutions, and pervasively 'around', finally, in the mental air we breathe. It has been, in the twentieth century, a major part of the vocation of Christian poets so to discipline our sense for the effulgence of creation – the lesser light – that our intellectual eye may be re-sensitivated to the epiphanies of supernatural revelation – the 'Greater Light' as the chorus calls it in T. S. Eliot's *The Rock*.

O Light invisible, we praise Thee!  
Too bright for mortal vision.  
O Greater Light, we praise Thee for the less;  
The eastern light our spires touch at morning;  
The light that slants upon our western doors at evening,  
The twilight over stagnant pools at batflight,  
Moon light and star light, owl and moth light,  
Glow-worm glowlight on a grassblade  
O Light invisible, we worship Thee!<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Revelation's realisation in its midpoint, Jesus Christ

Eliot's range of examples of the lesser light of creation reminds us that, indefinitely 'open' as the powers of our soul may be, we are nonetheless *earthlings* – for whom the light of day and its extinction at night are crucial to our biorhythm, who need the roof, walls and domesticity of homesteads, and share an environment with other species. It was, accordingly, altogether appropriate that the supreme epiphany to serve as revelation's vehicle took the form of *the Word's incarnation*, when he who is – as the Great Creed (the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople, produced 325-381) proclaims – 'Light from Light' was seen as a babe at his human mother's breast.

The Incarnation, celebrated liturgically in the Church of the Byzantine rite under the superlatively fitting title of *the Theophany* – the epiphany of God in his own person<sup>8</sup> – unfolds its

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<sup>7</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Choruses from "The Rock", X', in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, by T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1963; 1974), pp. 183-184.

<sup>8</sup> For the inter-relation of the themes of theophany and the 'birth of God according to the flesh', see C. Andronikoff, *Le sens des fêtes*, I. (Paris 1970), pp. 93-224.

purpose in the subsequent events of Jesus's childhood, Baptism, public ministry, and – above all – in his suffering, death and Resurrection and their aftermath, the coming of his Pentecostal Spirit, the Spirit of divine-human fulness.<sup>9</sup> For it is here that we see the scope of revelation in its full measure. Here, in the Christ of the Nativity and the ensuing scenes of the incarnate life up to the Cross, the rising from the Tomb and that mystery of presence in absence which is Pentecost, we see both revelation's amplitude and its goal.

As the definitive revelation both of the divine and of the human, and therefore of their inter-relationship, and in the new light he throws by his words and action on the earlier history of revelation in the 'Elder Covenant' with Israel and on the created order itself, the incarnate Word makes available to the world the greatest truth the world has ever known or can know. This is the 'greatest' truth because it possesses more far-reaching implications than any other, and because it is more wonderful, more inexhaustibly than any other the appropriate object of that admiration or wonder which Aristotle identified as philosophy's true point of departure. Here is revealed what St Thomas Aquinas called so simply *iter ad Deum*: 'the way to God'.<sup>10</sup> 'I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth' (Isaiah 49, 6).

### 3. From revelation to Tradition

From revelation to Tradition is no great step, since Tradition in the high theological meaning of the word, dignified by an initial capital letter, is revelation as registered by the corporate mind of the apostolic Church.<sup>11</sup> The revelation in Christ, which is also the revelation of God *as* Christ, would not have been a successful supreme disclosure of the way and will of the triune God in his saving outreach to us unless it was suitably received into the minds of its first and most crucial destinees, the apostolic founders of the Church. The question of whether the media of revelation in its transmission are to be thought of as written alone (the position of the sixteenth century Protestant reformers) or as both oral and written (as Catholicism and Orthodoxy hold) is altogether subsidiary to the primary question of Tradition as the aboriginal inhering of revelation in the corporate

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<sup>9</sup> Hence the immense importance for a theology of revelation of the mysteries of the life of Christ. It is one of the signs of the greatness of St Thomas that, despite his concern with the universal structures of being in the God-world relationship, he does full justice to this dimension. See J.-P. Torrell, O. P., *Le Christ en ses mystères. La vie et l'oeuvre de Jésus selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas's programmatic statements on Christ as, in his humanity, our road to God, appear in *Summa theologiae*, Ia., q. 2, prologue, and IIIa., q.1, prologue.

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted here to Père Congar's classic studies: *La Tradition et les traditions* I. *Essai historique*; II. *Essai théologique* (Paris 1960; 1963), and their condensation in *La Tradition et la vie de l'Église* (Paris 1963; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1984). For a systematic overview, see J. Bunnenberg, *Lebendige Treue zum Ursprung. Das Traditionsverständnis Yves Congars* (Mainz 1989).

consciousness of the apostolic witnesses. That is why the best modern Catholic theology treats Sacred Scripture as a monument of Tradition – the primary monument of the great Paradosis – and not as an alternative to Tradition. To say that something belongs to Tradition in the high theological sense – to Holy Tradition – is not as yet to make any comment on its written or non-written form.

It is because Holy Tradition inheres in the Church's 'deep' – that is, not always explicitly conscious – mind as herself the apostolic Church, the Church built on Peter and the Eleven, that the primary virtues she must practise in its regard are fidelity and good stewardship, not theological creativity and pastoral ingenuity (these come later).

The gift of revelation to the Church constitutes Tradition. That word ('tradition') to which the modern stream of consciousness spontaneously attaches such epithets as 'cramped' and 'hidebound' denotes rather the unbounded generosity of the true and living God. This is the *living* God, the God who is Life, because the salvation which is revelation's content is not only what God has done and does for her but also what he has been and is for her. The revelatory gift includes its Giver – the triune Lord in Jesus Christ. That is why the Church has always possessed Tradition's plenitude. But the 'living' God here is also the *true* God, the God who is Truth – the 'First Truth', *Prima Veritas*, St Thomas would say – because the life of the Church in springing from the divine self-disclosure, though it be a hidden and mysterious life, is not for all that an 'illogical' or 'undogmatic' one. Far from it! The Church very definitely has a *logos*: a message to communicate, a doctrine to teach. The Son of God did not come to the Church as Word without having truths to convey, nor did the Spirit of truth come to her as Paraclete, to complement the mission of the Word, without bringing to the apostolic mind all that Jesus had taught the Twelve, and leading them into 'all the truth' (John 16:13). Thanks to the twofold economy of the divine Word whose cutting power is sharper than a double-edged sword (Hebrews 4: 12) and the divine Spirit, subtle in his wisdom (Wisdom 7: 22), Tradition, though it be the comprehensive vision which fills the Church's mind, is also doctrinal substance. Faith is not some vague 'vision thing', strong on uplift but weak on truth-claims. It involves acts of apprehension, conception, recognition, as we assent responsibly to the truth that inheres in God's self-revelation to mankind. In the corporate faith of the apostolic community, Tradition is delivered to *understanding* hearts.<sup>12</sup>

Now among the truths with which Tradition tingles, those concerning the God-man are going to be crucial. Just as revelation's midpoint is Jesus Christ, in the acts which embodied in a

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<sup>12</sup> It is the strength of the Scots Presbyterian neo-patristic theologian Thomas Torrance to have emphasised this hard epistemic centre to the act of faith over against soft-focus theological liberalism: see T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith. The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh 1988), pp. 13-46.

series of wonderful ‘epiphanies’ his unique being and consciousness as the God-man, so Tradition’s centre is the apostolic witness to the meaning of his atoning work and saving teaching.

#### **4. The Mass as the milieu of Tradition**

The Church entertains the Tradition passed on to her in the milieu of the Mass. That is where, *par excellence*, the Church reads the Old and New Testaments in the unity of the Canon of Scripture (all sixty-six books of it!) as the biblical Word addressed first and foremost to herself, the Spouse of Christ, in the here-and-now of the assembly of her faithful. As the homilies of the patristic period, the age of the Fathers, and their continuations in later times indicate, she finds in those Scriptures the narrative of the triune God’s self-revelation – with its climax in Christ the Head and its consequences in the life of his body the Church.

Here the key is the ‘typological’ reading of the Bible where events in the far distant past throw light on the centre-point of salvation in Christ, and that central event of all history throws light forward in its turn to the time of the Church in which we ourselves live, to illuminate our spiritual effort and our ultimate goal.<sup>13</sup> That kind of interpretation of the Bible is already suggested by its inner structure, and it is positively mandated by the ancient Liturgies of Christian East and Christian West alike.

But is in not only the Fore-Mass, the Mass of the Catechumens, the Liturgy of the Word, that is Tradition’s milieu, the setting where the apostolic registering of revelation is at its most palpable. In the Eucharistic oblation itself, the Church, by the power of the Spirit, re-actualises the mystery of the Lord’s saving work on the Cross, in the Burial, and at the Easter tomb. In the Eucharistic Prayer – the ‘Canon’ not this time of Scripture but of the *Mass*, the Church does not – she cannot – separate the remembering of her Saviour, his identity and work, from the daily rediscovery of who she herself is as the Bride made immaculate on the Cross and so the mediatrix of his Sacrifice. (The section of the Mass Liturgy called the *anamnesis*, the ‘Remembering’, makes that plain.)

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<sup>13</sup> H. de Lubac, *L’Écriture dans la Tradition* (Paris 1967) draws out all that is theologically essential here in the same writer’s *Histoire et Esprit. L’intelligence de l’Écriture chez Origène* (Paris 1950) and the four volumes of *Exégèse médiévale* (Paris 1959-1964). De Lubac recovered a kind of spiritual exegesis that englobed the typological – the Liturgy’s own way of reading Scripture – as an instrument for uncovering the deep connections that make salvation history a coherent whole: compare H. U. von Balthasar, *Le Cardinal de Lubac: l’homme et son oeuvre* (Paris 1983), p.100.

So all doctrinal understanding in the Church is linked to the liturgical ‘re-actualisation’ of Scripture and to the celebration of the mysteries of Christ’s life which are also – by the Lord’s gift – her own.<sup>14</sup>

## 5. Scripture as Tradition’s primary monument

Catholics are not ‘bibliolaters’ yet their Church has endless veneration and love for the Scriptures: Tradition’s most signal expression. Of course the Gospel was ‘traditioned’ before any apostle or amanuensis or follower of an apostle ever set pen to parchment. Revelation – and so Tradition – is bigger than any expression of it, even one so capacious as Scripture. And yet, when we reflect on how in the modern period, with the rise of that subjectivism typical of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the idea of religious *truth* readily evaporates to be replaced by the warm steam of religious *psychology*, it becomes clear how necessary it was for revelation to enter through Tradition object form – the kind of plain, unmistakable object which it takes no effort for a book to be. The hard outlines of this book – the Bible – safeguards that ecclesial subjectivity that really is authentic, authoritative, because it was apostolically received. Boosting Scripture does not mean, as some Protestants seem to think, taking the Church down a peg or two. Quite the contrary. It is to protect the Church’s sense of faith from being expropriated by groups or individuals with their self-set agendas that Catholicism looks to Scripture, rejoicing in its sharp, clear difference from all human projection.

So Tradition – revelation in transmission – becomes text as Holy Scripture. Thanks to the charism – the gift – of *inspiration* received by the hagiographs – the sacred authors, and the consequence of that charism, which is *inerrancy* in all that concerns (even factually, in matters of history or natural science where pertinent) saving truth, and thanks also, when the Canon of Scripture is constructed, to the locating of the limits of the literature that bears these hallmarks (inspiration, inerrancy), the Church can point to this body of texts in all its glorious objectivity. And so she does, both negatively, by way of admonishing those Christians who prefer to do their own thing, not God’s thing, and positively, in helping people to grasp what it is she has, by revelation, in her mind. The Church gazes into the mirror of the Scriptures, and she sees there not so much her own face as her own *faith* as the Bride of the divine Word.

## 6. Tradition’s other media of expression

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<sup>14</sup> To this extent, I can accept the view of my Benedictine namesake, Fr Aidan Kavanagh, that the Liturgy constitutes ‘prima theologia’: see A. Kavanagh, O. S. B., *On Liturgical Theology* (New York 1984).

However, as the Catholic episcopate, gathered together under the dark sky of the Protestant revolt, were painfully aware at the Council of Trent, Scripture by itself cannot suffice to render the full Gospel proclaimed by the Church's preaching, celebrated in her sacraments, lived out in her ethos. Either because not all of articulable Tradition has passed into the biblical text or because the full meaning of that text is not recoverable by scanning of its content alone, the Church cannot rely on the Bible only. If the content of Tradition were not to suffer a diminution that truncated the Gospel, the Tridentine fathers reasoned, that Tradition must be recognised as enjoying twofold form. There are not just the Holy Scriptures. There are also the divinely originated oral traditions necessary to complement or elucidate the Bible's full meaning.

The crisis over the sources of revelation was resolved by the Council's insistence on parity of esteem, with Scripture, for traditions about faith and morals continuously maintained in the Church because coming 'from the mouth of Christ' or otherwise 'inspired by the Holy Spirit'.<sup>15</sup>

But where are these divinely originated oral traditions to be found? In a host of other monuments to which Catholics look to find the revelation of God in Jesus Christ his personal Word. These can be verbal, as with the baptismal Creeds – augmentations of those summaries of the apostolic preaching we find in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Verbal likewise are the texts of the Church Fathers who play a role in the transmission of Tradition second only to the apostles themselves. In the way the Fathers registered the Tradition that had found its objective medium in Scripture – in the way they received the biblical revelation – they acted, under God, as makers of the Christian religion in its final form, summarising and clarifying the rule of faith, establishing the grand lines of the historic liturgies and, not least, determining that crucial Canon of Scripture.<sup>16</sup>

The 'score' of the Church's liturgies is also of course in part verbal, made up of language, but with the Liturgy – considered not now as the milieu of Tradition in the (upper case) singular but as a monument of the traditions in the (lower case) plural, we also broach the *visual* medium, for the Liturgy is enacted in gestures and supremely in the sacramental signs. Visual too is the witness to Tradition of the Church's art, where, at their most evangelically ambitious, iconographers attempt a rendering of the whole Gospel in visual form, an artistic counterpart of the written Gospels and indeed of the message of the Bible as a whole, coming to a head as this does in the New Testament proclamation. As Catholic Christianity understands things, divine revelation is not only audial but

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<sup>15</sup> H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, edited by P. Hünermann (Freiburg 1991, 37th edition), No. 1501.

<sup>16</sup> See J. Ratzinger, 'Die Bedeutung der Väter im Aufbau des Glaubens', in idem., *Theologische Prinzipienlehre. Bausteine zur Fundamentatheologie* (Munich 1982), pp. 139-158.

visual, not only verbal but ocular – which is why iconography is so outstanding a witness to Tradition, to the fulness of the revealed truth proposed in Scripture. The inseparable character of these media – the preached words of the Word and the sensible signs of his actions – is also attested in the lives of the saints, formed as they were by the apostolic preaching to be, in the pattern of their lives, its visual expression, revelation's living seals.

There is also such a thing in the Church as unwritten traditions – in matters, especially, of worship and discipline – *originating from the apostles themselves* as men endowed with a unique authority to determine what divine revelation had left open in the life of the Church as a believing, worshipping, acting and praying people. One thinks here, for instance, of the putting in place of the orders of bishop, presbyter (priest) and deacon as the local 'applications' of the apostolic office, and the way that, at the council of Jerusalem, the apostles set aside the need for circumcision and the rest of the ritual Torah (the Jewish Law) as conditions for the entry of Gentiles into the covenant life of the Church. One could add: the establishing of the main Hours of Christian prayer (later to be the divine Office), such liturgical gestures as the Sign of the Cross, and doubtless much in the concrete form of the sacraments, as well as the continence or abstinence from marital relations of bishops, if not priests.<sup>17</sup> What is common to the contents of such a list is being *apostolically given* – but this, evidently, is not the same thing as oral tradition *divinely originated* which was, rather, *apostolically received*. The 'apostolic tradition', then, consists of Tradition plus the traditions the apostles left behind. The complicated nature of this topic usefully alerts us to the fact that wealth (and here are tremendous religious riches) always means complexity. This is as true of the Church's inheritance as it is of personal property.

## **7. The need for a *magisterium***

It might be thought that the Catholic's good fortune in being able to contextualise Scripture in so profusely flowering a garden of theological delights – everything from Caravaggio to the Armenian liturgy – would make it easy to interpret Scripture, Tradition's objective correlate. But steady on! First of all, richness is all very well, but there is such a thing as an *embarras de richesse* as well. Christians unsympathetic to biblicism as excessively narrow and to theological liberalism

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<sup>17</sup> The present writer is inclined to think that a good deal in the discipline of the sub-apostolic Church is based upon apostolic practice rather than ecclesial creativity. The assumption of modern scholars that they know more about these things than do early patristic writers needs questioning: one way to do so is by asking whether, *in an ecclesial context*, early Christian sources should be approached by way of a hermeneutic of suspicion (assuming that a later development is likely to be falsification) or a hermeneutic of *recognition* (assuming the contrary). For this latter concept, see A. Nichols, O. P., *Holy Order. The Apostolic Ministry from the New Testament to the Second Vatican Council* (Dublin 1990) p. 4.

as dispiritingly thin are often attracted, as with High Anglicans, to the kind of ‘multi-media’ portrait of Tradition I have been painting. But if at the same time, as with such Anglicans, they are hostile to, or lack the experience of, a sacred teaching office, they soon find that, faced with the bewildering variety of Tradition’s monuments from numerous points in space and time, they are as much launched on a sea of private judgment as any primitive Lutheran or, for that matter, sophisticated Latitudinarian.

In the Church’s ecumenical Councils and the *ex cathedra* judgments of her popes the Creeds are extended by reference to further aspects or entailments of themselves, just as the same Creeds came into existence as expansions of the brief dogmatic nuclei in the New Testament itself (such as the affirmation, ‘Jesus is Lord’, I Corinthians 12:3). Episcopate and papacy – assisted, evidently, by theologians who are (or jolly well should be) learned in the lore of Tradition’s multi-faceted expression, interpret these multifarious monuments by virtue of the ‘charism of truth’ the apostolic ministry exercises in fulfilment of the promise of its Lord.

In this way we become aware of ‘new’ – to us – doctrines: fresh articulations of the tacit content of the ‘given’ of Tradition, the precious ‘deposit’ of faith. For the most part, such dogmas are dramatic examples of doctrine hard won, honed in intellectual strife. But all the time, every day, in the ordinary preaching of the Church’s pastors (the Pope for the universal Church, the bishop for the local church), the same process is continuing, more gently and therefore less remarkably – unless, that is, what is taught enters into sharp collision with the *Zeitgeist*, something we see happening where the Catholic teaching on sexuality (always within marriage, always at once unitive and procreative in its meaning) is concerned.

Please notice too how the usefulness of the magisterium to ‘faith in truth’ is not just a matter of helping us to hear *what* Tradition has to say (the content of doctrine), but *how* Tradition says it (doctrine’s overall shape or proportions). Someone may be aware of all the Christian truths discretely in such fashion that either they entertain them atomistically or do so by a false majorisation of one or another doctrine, thus distorting the face of revelation as a whole. For with faces to change one feature is to change everything. From the sixteenth century onwards, the magisterium has accepted the task of overseeing the presentation of Christian truth through commissioning, promulgating or at least authorising and confirming *catechisms*. And that task is a vital one. We need to see the shape of our faith in its entirety, or else we shall not see the wood for the trees. So seeing is not to solve an intellectual puzzle, but to move forward on that journey of transfiguration of mind and heart and all our powers which we call growth in holiness. We cannot

profit by the gifts of God unless we are taught which they are and how they are related as well as how obtained. We must be equipped for the journey to Glory.<sup>18</sup>

## 8. A liturgical life reflecting Revelation in Tradition

Our need, then, as worshipping Christians, is for a liturgical life that reflects Revelation as given in Tradition along the lines I have laid out in the above. Let me lay out the criteria for authentic worship which follow from the theology of Revelation in Tradition I have offered.

1. Like supernatural Revelation itself, the Liturgy must take up and build on the materials of natural revelation: the cosmic elements, and the natural capacity of man to be a religious being, his ability to shape a sacred ‘vocabulary’ both of word and of gesture. This criterion at once rules out *some* notions of the Liturgy. The idea of an ‘anthropomorphic Liturgy’ in tune with the supposed ‘anthropocentric turn’ of Western culture and consequently ‘acosmic’ in character – careless of the non-human realms from the angelic to that of material nature – is incompatible with the theological doctrine we have established. So also is the idea of a ‘secular Liturgy’ which rejects the poetic language and ritual activity typical of the sacral mode of human expression. Judging by our first criterion, this concept too is a contradiction in terms.<sup>19</sup> Congruent with that criterion, by contrast, is ‘classical’ celebration – in a rite typified by such features as: the strangeness or non-everyday character of the language employed; the submission of the liturgical actors to an order of worship carried out facing the Beyond rather than the immediate participants; the use of gestures that are clearly intended to be a choreography of reverence, however imperfectly executed; and the situating of the whole performance in a space that is symbolically rich rather than simply functional or utilitarian. Here we find, at the purely natural level where natural revelation operates, a power of enchantment that also conveys the seriousness and *difference* of what is being enacted.

2. But, like natural revelation, the Liturgy must surrender itself to the service of the more-than-natural disclosure of God which has its centre-point in the mysteries of Christ’s Incarnation, Atonement and Glorification – up to his Session and Sending of the Pentecostal Spirit, all within the context of the biblical revelation as a whole. The Liturgy is to present to us the mysteries of Christ’s life, death and Resurrection, after the fashion of biblical typology – in other words, both as fulfilling

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<sup>18</sup> The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, promulgated by Pope John Paul II is of course an excellent example of this. I try to show its holism in A. Nichols, O. P., *The Splendour of Doctrine. The ‘Catechism of the Catholic Church’ on Christian Believing* (Edinburgh 1995), and the companion volume *The Service of Glory. The ‘Catechism of the Catholic Church’ on Worship, Ethics, Spirituality* (Edinburgh 1997).

<sup>19</sup> These corollaries of theological anthropology are well expressed in L. Bouyer, *Le Rite et l’Homme. Sacralité naturelle et Liturgie* (Paris 1962).

the promise of the Old Covenant and as opening to man an endless life of friendship with God through the New and Everlasting Covenant in the Age to Come. In this way, the Liturgy reflects the purpose of the consummate divine revelation itself, which is that we should make definitive salvation through Jesus Christ our own. The liturgical cycle represents the course the Son of God followed as Son of Man, granting access to the blessings of salvation because his grace is still operative within it, as he continues to make available the same saving deeds by which he healed and raised up human nature to share the Father's life. Our liturgical life must be the objective correlate in worship of the divine redeeming action that Revelation displays.<sup>20</sup> This rules out any subjectivistic or naturalistic concept of the Liturgy, which would treat worship as a medium in which to express our impressions of existence, whether these be anthropomorphically or cosmically (for that is still *naturally*) conceived.<sup>21</sup>

3. Next, the Liturgy, as a monument of Holy Tradition, must always be in harmony with the doctrinal mind of the Church as expressed in the other monuments of Tradition: Scripture above all, but also those remaining monuments – the Creeds, the writings of the Fathers, Christian iconography, and the lives of the saints – in which the divinely originated oral traditions find expression. This third criterion will involve a number of things. It will mean that the prayers of the Liturgy should give clear testimony, albeit in a 'doxological' mode, to doctrinal truth, rather than accommodate it to what 'modern man', that transiently existing creature, wants to hear. It will warrant the attempt to give the riches of the Bible fuller play in the Liturgy of the Word. This criterion also requires the presence in the texts of the Liturgy of the insights of the Fathers into biblical revelation; the celebration of the Liturgy in a spatial setting defined by Christian iconography, and the setting forth of the means of grace, above all in the Holy Eucharist, in such a way that they can arouse that devotional engagement which aligns the minds, hearts and emotions of believers with the Saviour – the Lamb who was slain – and inspires them to live sacrificially after his model, after the fashion that in all generations has made the Church's saints who they are.

4. The final criterion suggested for authentic liturgical life by my overview of the theology of Revelation is that, when worship is flourishing as it should, the magisterium of the Church – the Pope and bishops – will enjoy a twofold role in its regard. First, inasmuch as the Liturgy is a monument of Tradition, they will be the guardians of the liturgical patrimony, defending it against

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<sup>20</sup> The doctor of this is surely Bl. Columba Marmion: see notably his *Le Christ dans ses mystères* (Tamines 1919).

<sup>21</sup> For the inter-relation of the two, important today in a particular manner thanks to the burgeoning interest in a theology of the Church's relations with other religions, see the admirably clear study by F. Clark, *Godfaring. On Reason, Faith, and Sacred Being* (Washington and London 2000).

deviation and truncation. Secondly, inasmuch as they have the duty to present to the faithful the overall contours of Revelation in its true shape and proportions, the Pope and the bishops have a mandate delicately to adjust the Liturgy's means of expression so that it may with greater effectiveness carry out its task of reflecting that Revelation and forming believers according to the pattern of the saving action it unfolds.

### **A practical conclusion**

I come at last to a practical conclusion. As worshipping beings called through divine revelation to Glory, we live in particular times and places. In the contemporary West, we cannot as Latin Christians avoid the issue of our present liturgical conflicts and perplexities which are such that, even outside Traditionalist circles, the word 'crisis' is hardly misplaced.

The criteria I have put forward for a Liturgy that is cosmic and sacral, the objective correlate of Christian redemption, full of doctrine, drawing amply on Scripture as also on the Fathers, contextualised by iconography, and capable of arousing the kind of devotion that engenders sanctity, suggests to my mind a re-reform of the Roman rite. By this re-reform, we should introduce into the classical Roman Liturgy – recovered as the benchmark of the Western rite – all that is best in the Pauline reform: notably, to take up points aired in my presentation, its fuller (perhaps too full!) Lectionary and the rich patristic syntheses to be found in its wonderful Prefaces.<sup>22</sup> The diffusion of such a rite, whether in Latin or in a 'high' vernacular capable of exercising the functions of a sacral language, would not only be a service to divine Revelation. It would also assist the Christian lives of the faithful. From what I have said it should in any case be apparent that these two objectives are one and the same.

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<sup>22</sup> See A. Nichols, O. P., *Looking at the Liturgy. A Critical View of its Contemporary Form* (San Francisco 1996), pp. 115-123.