

Topic 12: Toward a Theology of Revelation

The same Holy Mother Church holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the things that were created through the natural light of human reason... Vatican I, Dei Filius

Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, He chose "to share those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind." Vatican II, Dei Verbum

I. General Understanding of Revelation in Roman Catholic Theology: Vatican I affirms that the utterly transcendent God ("beginning and end of all things"), can be known with certainty from created things with the natural light of human reason. Vatican I argues that natural knowledge of God is available through the use of reason. While faith has a rational basis, its object is supernatural, excelling created intellect. This seeks to counter rationalism, on the one hand, and fideism on the other, but resulted in a largely defensive apologetic built around the "deposit of faith" metaphor.

For the Church to recognize the natural competence of all people in matters concerning God imposes an obligation not on unbelievers but believers, especially the church and theology. In whatever concerns its God, the church must stand ready to converse with everyone, to listen to everyone, to argue with everyone who cannot in advance be denied having reason and good will.

The point of revelation is God's salvation: the revealed Word concerns the salvation of humankind then treats of the transmission of revelation in scripture/tradition.

In relation to the theology of revelation proposed by Vatican I, Dei Verbum represents a careful attempt to integrate doctrinal continuity and development. The emphasis is on the Word both as heard (received) and proclaimed. The Word is evident in created realities and in (sacred) history, and realized in deeds and words. The human response of faith in the Word is prompted by grace of Holy Spirit.

II. The Dynamics of Revelation: The starting point of a theology of revelation, in contrast to the discussion on faith, cannot retain a purely anthropocentric perspective. A theology of revelation corresponds to a phenomenology of faith, but also involves a transcendent object "given" to the spiritual subject. Beyond phenomenology, a theology of faith begins with the subject grasped by faith.

Revelation entails two dimensions: Divine initiative: revelation occurs when the object of revelation (God) makes itself "known" to faith (i.e. God's self-manifestation); Human response: this "becoming known" cannot be conceived apart from the reception and response of the person in faith.

Revelation is a free offer, mediated through the signs of gesture and language, which is received and accepted. Its structure is that of offer-acceptance. The experience of God as transcendent is a fundamental element in the whole event of revelation, but the event of revelation is more than any one human experience of God: it is historical in its dimensions

III. The Use of Revelation by Theology: Starting point: Jesus is the absolute medium of the Christian experience of revelation. There may be other mediums, but no unconditioned ones. Relating Jesus with other mediums represents a crucial issue for Christology today.

The description and interpretation of the Christian experience of revelation as an encounter with a personal and loving God builds on an analogy to human encounters. Recall that all theological language is analogical. Revelation is a free gift or grace, mediated through the signs of gesture and language, which is received and accepted. Thus, its structure is that of offer-acceptance. The experience of God as transcendent is a fundamental element in the whole event of revelation, but the event of revelation is more than the human experience. Revelation as we know it and reflect upon it is finally interpreted experience. Theology represents a second-level reflection upon the transcendental "experience" of God.

The purpose of theology must be congruent with the human response to revelation's end, which is fulfillment of the person in God the initiator. Hence, theology is an articulation of the response and its implications.

Having faith, that is, believing in this revelation and giving full assent of the will to it, precedes understanding. But such believing does not grant or imply possessing complete objective knowledge, even in the case of authentic mystical experience.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree or disagree with Vatican II's argument that natural knowledge of God is available through the use of reason? Why?
2. What are some of the instances Jesus Christ has been an absolute medium in

your life?

3. What are other situations that also have an "offer-acceptance" structure?