

### **Topic 13: The Problem of Interpretation**

**I. Introduction to Part IV: Revelation and Scripture:** Up to now we have engaged in a general examination of the foundations of Christian theology, above all the dynamics of faith and revelation understood as flowing from the constitution of the human person as a possible "hearer of the Word."

We already have encountered the primary criteria for interpreting theological statements.

- First, to correctly understand a theological statement we need to appeal to the revelatory religious experience that gave rise to the theological formulation.
- Second, we need to locate the center of gravity of the experience of Christian revelation -the personal encounter with God mediated by Jesus and made possible by the action of the Holy Spirit - and the content of that encounter that there is God, that God is personal, and that the personal God is boundless love for all.
- Third, the process of interpretation must descend into the very core of the revelatory encounter because even the most authentic and primitive statements of faith are prone to ideological manipulation over time.
- What is revelation for? It does not aim to give us information about God, but rather to enable us to encounter, receive, and act on God's free offer of salvation.

Now we turn to the next great concern, the status of the Christian scriptures and the relationship between the themes of revelation and sacred scripture. It is difficult to talk about Christian revelation without discussing the Christian scriptures even though it is a mistake to naively equate the two (scripture = revelation.)

The Christian tradition's basic doctrine about the status of scripture: Scripture represents the *norma normans non normata*, the norm which serves as the criterion of all other statements and is not normed by any other statement. But while it is easy enough to say that scripture is the norm for all theological statements, it is more complex to say how this operates. In what way does scripture act as the *norma normans*?

**II. Background of Hermeneutics and the Problem of Interpretation:** We introduce the term, "hermeneutics," which comes from the Greek *hermeneuein*, which means "to interpret." A key issue for hermeneutics involves the development of criteria for text-interpretation.

In ancient Greece, interpretation involved two distinct but interrelated tasks/ approaches:

- The grammatical approach seeks the literal meaning of linguistic components of a text;
- The allegorical approach appropriates this grammatical meaning within the wider spiritual/ mythical framework of the time.

The developments in patristic and medieval Christian approaches to interpretation always begin from a starting point of faith in Jesus Christ as the ultimate event of salvation.

- Origin emphasizes the need for both historical-grammatical and mystical-allegorical ways of interpretation (including further nuances involving moral application).
- Augustine develops a philosophy of language that, later in the Middle Ages, both grounds allegorical interpretation and canonical renewal.
- For Aquinas, exegesis grounds a theological interpretation by dogmatic theology.
- Trent: the magisterium decides the criteria and validity of biblical interpretation.

The crisis of interpretation following the Reformation and Enlightenment:

- Luther argues that interpretation cannot be controlled by the magisterium; individual believers must read and interpret biblical texts with help of the Holy Spirit (his implicit criteria for interpretation: salvation is through faith alone.)
- Schleiermacher turns to "critical interpretation" which seeks to understand the sense of the text. He rejects all extra-textual authorities (i.e. magisterium and allegorical interpretation) and employs hermeneutics as the art of understanding the sense of the text (i.e. both the psychological and the grammatical sense).

Interpretation in the 20th Century (Heidegger and Gadamer): the heightened awareness of historical consciousness requires a more nuanced view of the art of understanding.

- No neutral approach to the text exists, for the historical conditions of the interpreter affect the interpretation. Hence, all interpretation involves a hermeneutical circle.
- We understand the parts of a text in terms of our preunderstanding of the whole.

- Understanding is made possible and limited by the horizon within which it occurs.
- The fusion of horizons: the world of the reader and the world of the text intersect.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what ways can you define yourself as a "hearer of the Word"?
2. How can we today understand the sense of texts, especially ancient texts, whose world-view we no longer share?
3. How are we to interpret scripture and tradition and theological statements?