

**THE  
CATHOLIC  
UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE  
BIBLE**

**John A. Hardon, S.J.**

## **THE TABLE OF CONTENTS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Historic Christianity

### **PART ONE – THE BIBLE**

#### **CHAPTER I – THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD**

Revelation

Natural Revelation

Supernatural Revelation

Sacred Tradition

Sacred Scripture

#### **CHAPTER II – INSPIRATION IN THE BIBLE**

Testimony of the Scriptures

Church's Teaching

How Is the Bible Inspired?

Implications

Inerrancy

No Contradictions

Original Text

Reverence for the Word of God

#### **CHAPTER III – THE CANON OF THE BIBLE**

The Old and New Testaments

Old Testaments

Palestinian and Alexandrian Canon

New Testament

#### **CHAPTER IV – HOW THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS ARE RELATED**

Fulfillment

Perfection

Continuation

Interpretation

Completion

Development  
Development of Doctrine  
Development of Revelation  
Incarnation

## CHAPTER V – THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

Science of Hermeneutics  
Basic Meanings  
    The Literal Sense  
    The Mystical Sense  
Teaching of Second Vatican  
    The Meaning of the Human Writers  
    The Intention of the Holy Spirit

## PART TWO – THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

### CHAPTER VI – THE OLD TESTAMENT

St. Matthew  
St. Mark  
St. Luke  
St. John's Gospel

### CHAPTER VII – THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Gospels  
    St. Matthew  
    St. Mark  
    St. Luke  
    St. John  
Acts of the Apostles  
Letters of St. Paul  
The Catholic Epistles  
    James  
    Peter  
    John  
    Jude  
The Apocalypse

## PART THREE – MASTER THEMES OF THE BIBLE

## CHAPTER VIII – OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Natural Knowledge  
Revealed Knowledge

## CHAPTER IX – OUR LOVE OF GOD

Old Testament  
New Testament

## CHAPTER X – MESSIANISM

Concept of the Messiah  
Messianic Development  
    Patriarchal Period  
    Royal Messianism  
    The Exile and After  
Three-Fold Anointing

## PART FOUR – SPIRITUAL TEACHING OF THE GOSPELS

### CHAPTER XI – CHRISTIANITY IS HISTORICAL

The Gospels Are Factual  
The Gospels Are Not Imaginary

### CHAPTER XII – THE WORD OF GOD

The Word In Himself  
The Mission of the Word

### CHAPTER XIII – THE ANNUNCIATION AND INCARNATION

### CHAPTER XIV – THE VISITATION

Mediatrice of Grace  
Hail Mary  
Full of Grace  
The Lord Is With Thee  
Blessed Art Thou Among Women  
And Blessed Is the Fruit of Thy Womb, Jesus  
Holy Mary  
Mother of God

Pray For Us Sinners Now and At the Hour of Our Death

CHAPTER XV – MARY MAGNIFIES THE LORD

CHAPTER XVI – THE LESSONS OF BETHLEHEM

Political Power and Jesus Christ  
The Poverty of the Incarnate God  
The First Message of the Angel to the Shepherds  
The Angelic Promise of Peace  
The Shepherds Came and Believed  
The Shepherds As First Apostles  
The Heart of Mary  
Prayer

CHAPTER XVII – PRESENTATION AND PURIFICATION

Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
Presentation of Jesus  
The *Nunc Dimittis*  
The Prophetess Anna

CHAPTER XVIII – THE VISITATION OF THE MAGI

The Magi Symbolize the Gentiles  
Herod Symbolizes the State

CHAPTER XIX – JESUS FOUND IN THE TEMPLE

God Tries Those He Loves  
Mary's Lesson to All of Us

CHAPTER XX – BAPTISM OF JESUS

John the Baptist Announces Jesus  
Christ's Baptism and Humility  
Announcement of Christ's Divinity

CHAPTER XXI – TEMPTATION OF CHRIST BY THE DEVIL

Why was Christ Tempted?  
Temptations of Christ  
First Temptation  
Second Temptation

## INTRODUCTION

It must seem strange to write a book on *The Catholic Understanding of the Bible*. But, it will not be strange once we realize two things: that every major religion in the world has what it calls its Bible, and that among Christians, the Bible is variously understood.

Not to speak of the Catholic understanding of the Bible would be confusing, to say the least, and even misleading. The Bible is not just the Bible. It is the foundation for Christianity. Everything depends on three things: what books form the contents of the Bible, how the Bible is translated, and most importantly, how the Bible is interpreted.

All the religions have their own scriptures. The Hindus have the *Vedas*, Buddhists the *Tipitaka*, Taoists their *Tao Teh Ching*, and Moslems the *Koran*. Just what constitutes a sacred writing and how the scriptures are to be understood are so varied and divergent as to defy scientific analysis. Much of the difficulty that a Christian faces in studying other systems of faith arises from this basic difference--between the Bible of Christianity (and Judaism) and the equivalent sacred literature of other living religions. A standard definition of the Bible is to call it a publication that is preeminent especially in authoritativeness.

Before we go any further, it will be useful to make an overview of how the modern world, more specifically our twentieth and twenty-first centuries, look at the Bible. Without this perspective, we could be using the same words that are currently en vogue when speaking and writing about the Bible, but our contemporaries would not know what we are talking about. Not only has a new biblical vocabulary come into existence, but a totally new perspective of the scriptures has been born.

## HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY

From the dawn of the Christian religion, the followers of Christ have considered the Bible a special communication of God, in which the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus of Nazareth in the New, revealed to the chosen people the secrets of divine wisdom and the means of salvation for mankind. The Christian Scriptures are not just an important piece of religious writing; nor, as in Islam, only basic guidelines of moral conduct. They are believed to have been co-authored by God, who gave the inspiration and direction to the hagiographer whose faculties of mind, will, and execution were mystically directed by the Holy Spirit, yet without prejudice to the native qualities of the human agent.

One result of this uniqueness has been the concern of the Church to trace the data and text of the Bible to its earliest possible sources. That is why biblical archaeology and papyrology are distinctively Christian sciences. Since the events described in the Bible and the narratives it contains pertain to certain periods of history, it is imperative to know their historical context. We must therefore know the language and geography, culture and biography, and even economics and biology. Why? Because this knowledge is an invaluable means to better understand the sacred text and come closer to its original and authentic wording.

Nor is that all. Christians assume that to have the biblical text is one thing, even when its authenticity is assured. However, to know the true meaning of the Bible is something else. In every age since apostolic times, Christians have wrestled over the interpretation of the Bible, and wars have been fought over the differences. The science of biblical hermeneutics is also very Christian. Hermeneutics is the interpretation of Sacred Scripture and inquiring into its true meaning. It defines the laws that biblical scholars are to follow in order to determine and explain the sense of the revealed word of God. So distinctive is hermeneutics that Oriental specialists in the Hindu tradition, for example, are baffled by what to them seems such wasted effort: whether Jesus' words, "I and the Father are one," should be taken literally or symbolically. Hinduism allows for avatars, or incarnations of the deity; and advaita, or the identity of God and the universe. It makes no claim to possess objective religious truths and even the search is considered illusory. Thus even the great Mahatma Gandhi never became a Christian because, as he said, the human mind can never know the truth. Life is the constant search for the truth.

This volume is intended as a textbook for a course on the Catholic understanding of the Bible. Its purpose therefore is clearly academic. It will deal with the basics of biblical study. As we go along, references will be made to authors and sources for a more scientific and advanced grasp of Sacred Scripture.

It is assumed that those who use this book will do so with a copy of the Bible always at their disposal. It is further assumed that those who take this course are interested in more than merely learning about the Bible. This course is intended especially for those who want to use the Bible as a means of teaching others about the Catholic faith.

This is especially important in our day. In so many countries of the Western world, the culture has been deeply influenced by Protestantism. Consequently, many Catholics have come to identify God's revealed truth with the Bible. They practically assume that everything which God has manifested about Himself and our responsibilities in doing His will are contained in the scriptures. They further assume that each person is somehow divinely enlightened to interpret the Bible without dependence on the magisterium of the Catholic Church.

As though all of this was not enough, Catholics are now literally flooded with a bewildering variety of biblical translations and, to change the figure of speech, deluged with so many biblical commentaries that they wonder, "What are we to believe?"

That is why a book of the Catholic understanding of the Bible is not only useful, but necessary. Over the centuries, wars have been fought over the Sacred Scriptures. It is imperative that the desperate need for unity in our divided society should be promoted by the revealed word of God as found in Holy Writ. As Catholics, we have the duty to advance the cause of re-uniting a dismembered world by our clear and deep understanding of biblical revelation.

## **PART ONE – THE BIBLE**

### **Chapter I**

#### **THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD**

The place to begin any course for understanding the Bible is to see how the Bible is the revealed word of God. This is not so obvious as we may at first suppose. People use the expression “revelation” and “word of God” in so many different ways that it is not always clear what these persons mean.

Our first step, therefore, towards getting some grasp of what the Bible is all about is to see how the Sacred Scriptures are part of God’s revelation to the human family. In order to see this as clearly as possible, we should look at the meaning of revelation from a variety of angles.

We will ask ourselves several questions in sequence and then briefly answer each one as we go along:

- \* What is revelation?
- \* What is natural revelation?
- \* What is supernatural revelation?
- \* What is unwritten supernatural revelation (or Sacred Tradition)?
- \* What is written supernatural revelation (or Sacred Scripture)?

If it seems strange to ask so many different questions, the reason is that we understand something only as clearly as we understand it distinctively. Clearness of thought means being able to distinguish one idea from another. Failure to distinguish Sacred Scripture from other forms of God’s communication to the human race is the bedrock of so much confusion among otherwise sincere believers in Judaeo-Christianity.

#### **REVELATION**

When we say that the Bible is revelation we obviously mean that something is

revealed or disclosed by someone. Thus, we speak of revealing a secret or that one person revealed himself to another person, or that something never known before suddenly becomes known to us and we call it a “revelation”.

All these uses of the word “revelation” have one thing in common. What was previously unknown, or not so well known, becomes either known or better known. The word itself comes from two Latin words, *re*, which means to remove or take away, and *velum*, which means a veil or covering. Consequently to reveal something is to unveil or uncover what had previously been more or less hidden from the human mind.

Moreover, revelation implies that one person or individual intelligent being is revealing what is on his mind to someone else who then receives the revelation. When I reveal my identity to a previous stranger, I tell that person who I am or something about myself, which he or she did not know before I made the disclosure. Every revelation, then, is a personal communication from one individual who does the revealing to another individual to whom the revealer manifests himself.

Self-revelation, in fact, is the foundation of friendship. And the degree to which one person is willing to reveal himself to someone else is the measure of their friendship. This is almost a platitude. Since friendship is mutual love, there can be no true love between two people unless they first know one another. The human will is a blind faculty. It can choose only what the mind tells the will is good. The will can only love, which is sustained choice, what the mind has told the will is lovable.

One more observation. Although the will is blind and must be informed by the mind, the will has the power to command the mind to seek to know. In other words, the mind and will are mutually dependent on each other. The mind must show the will what should be chosen and loved. But the will must command the mind to obtain the knowledge which is then offered to the will for choosing and loving.

In terms of friendship, therefore, two persons will not know one another unless each is willing to manifest himself or herself to the other.

Immediately we see that just as human beings reveal themselves to other human

beings, so God reveals Himself to us. Indeed, God's self-disclosure to the human race is the basis for every other form of self discourse among ourselves. Unless God had first decided to give us a mind with which to know and given us knowledge to share with others, there would be no speech among human beings or for that matter, no social communication or society in the world today.

## **NATURAL REVELATION**

There are two ways that God has revealed Himself to the human family. One way is said to be natural and the other supernatural.

What is God's natural revelation? It is ordinary revelation. It is the way God tells us about Himself through the ordinary channels that we all have at our disposal.

What are these channels? They are the power of thinking that every human being has on reaching what we call the age of reason. Secondly, it is the world of creatures that manifest the goodness and greatness of God who created this world in which we live.

Both the Old and New Testaments verify man's natural capacity for knowing God from the world of creation in which he lives. In the Old Testament, the Book of Wisdom devotes no less than nine verses to its criticism of those who do not use their reason to arrive at the knowledge of the one true God:

Yes, naturally stupid are all men who have not known God and who, from the good things that are seen, have not been able to discover Him-who-is, or, by studying the works, have failed to recognize the Artificer. Fire however, or wind, or the swift air, the sphere of the stars, impetuous water, heaven's lamps, are what they have held to be the gods who govern the world.

If, charmed by their beauty, they have taken things for gods, let them know how much the Lord of those excels them, since the very Author of beauty has created them. And if they have been impressed by their power and energy let them deduce from these how much mightier is He that has formed them, since through the grandeur and beauty of the creatures we may, by analogy, contemplate their Author.

Small blame, however, attaches to these men, for perhaps they only go astray in their search for God and their eagerness to find Him; living among His works, they strive to comprehend them and fall victim to appearances, seeing so much beauty. Even so, they are not to be excused; if they are capable of acquiring enough knowledge to be able to investigate the world, how have they been so slow to find the Master? (Ws 13:1-9)

St. Paul is even more clear in his denunciation of those who do not use their natural reason to arrive at the knowledge of the one true God. The Apostle to the Gentiles insists on man's responsibility to praise God, arising from his ability to know God from the creatures He has made. He told the recent converts to Christianity that some of their contemporaries were keeping "the truth imprisoned in their wickedness." How so? Because "what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them since God Himself has made it plain. Ever since God created the world, His everlasting power and deity – however invisible – have been there for the mind to see in the things He has made. That is why such people are without excuse. They knew God and yet refused to honor Him as God or to thank Him. Instead, they made nonsense out of logic and their empty minds were darkened. The more they called themselves philosophers, the more stupid they grew, until they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for a worthless imitation" (Rom 1:18-23).

As St. Augustine was later to explain in his *Confessions*, there is a grim recompense for man's refusal to acknowledge God as his master. God allows a man's spirit to lose mastery over his own body. Lust is the normal consequence of pride.

Moreover, each one of us has a deep down desire for happiness that is never perfectly satisfied here on earth. Each of us also realizes that this imperfect happiness depends on how well we behave, that there is no real joy in selfishness and no peace of heart in cruelty. These too are part of God's natural revelation, telling through reason how He wants us to use the creatures that enter our life. He tells us the price we must pay to obtain peace of soul here on earth and the complete fulfillment of our desires that we instinctively look forward to beyond the grave.

## **SUPERNATURAL REVELATION**

Natural revelation was not all that God has disclosed to the human race. There would be no Sacred Scripture, and no Christianity, unless God had revealed Himself beyond what we can know from our own reason and the world of nature in which we live.

We begin to begin to understand Sacred Scripture only if we realize that God has given us a supernatural revelation. Supernatural revelation begins where natural revelation ends. It is in the character of a grace from God, who has decided to communicate Himself in a manner that far exceeds His manifestation through nature.

There are two levels of this supernatural revelation, as capsulized by the author of Hebrews: “At various times in the past and in various ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, but in our own time, the last days, He has spoken to us through His Son, the Son that He has appointed to inherit everything and through whom He made everything there is. He is the radiant light of God’s glory, and the perfect copy of His nature” (Heb 1:1-2).

The difference between these two kinds of supernatural communication lies in the fact that, before Christ, God spoke indeed, but still indirectly through the prophets, who were inspired to tell others what Yahweh had told them. In the person of Christ, however, it was no longer God speaking merely through human seers chosen by Him; it was God Himself speaking as man to His fellow members of the human race. We might say that revelation is said to be supernatural when God tells us about Himself immediately, somewhat as we do when we talk to another person.

Even as we can talk to people, so God can dispense with our use of reason and reflection on the world of nature, and directly enlighten our minds about what He wants us to know. When He does this, we call it a supernatural way of revealing Himself to us.

Immediately we see that divine communication of truth can be supernatural in two ways. It is always supernatural in the manner of communication just described. But it can also be supernatural when its content is beyond the capacity of human

nature to attain.

Thus, revelation may be supernatural twice over: In the subjective powers by which a person acquires what God desires to reveal; or/and in its very essence, when God discloses such mysteries as the Trinity and the Incarnation. In the first case, revelation is supernatural in the manner that God chooses to communicate Himself to human beings. It partakes of a miraculous enlightenment of the seer, who then serves as a divine legate for sharing with others what God has supernaturally communicated to that person. In every case, however, the acceptance of revelation requires the influx of supernatural grace to enable a person to believe.

When God reveals Himself supernaturally in the content of His revelation, He is telling us about His own intimate, personal life as God; that He is an eternal Society of three persons, in one God; and that He intends to share this divine life with us, by having us participate in His own perfect happiness in the Trinity, by knowing and loving Him with unspeakable intimacy for all eternity.

## **SACRED TRADITION**

Having decided to reveal Himself, not only naturally but supernaturally, God might have done so personally to each individual human being.

Much as each of us arrives at some natural knowledge of God by our own reasoning powers, so God might have separately revealed Himself supernaturally to each and every member of the human family.

But He chose not to do so. Instead, He chose certain persons since the dawn of history to whom He specially revealed Himself, and through whom, then, He wanted the rest of mankind to believe in Him.

This is perfectly understandable. In this way, God would ensure the rise of a believing community, who would be bound together by the common faith in accepting revelation made to a chosen prophet or spokesman of God.

Some of these prophets, or divine-messengers, would be instructed by God to share their revelation with others without being also directed to put this revelation in

writing. What they have left us we now call Sacred Tradition. Others were directed by God to put the revealed message in writing. We call this Sacred Scripture.

Before going any further, it might be useful to clarify three different senses in which the single word “tradition” is used in Catholic theology.

\* *Sacred Tradition*, as we have explained, is supernatural revelation which was completed about the year 100 A. D. with the death of the last of the apostles, St. John the Evangelist. It is supernatural revelation that was indeed inspired by God, but not originally inspired in written form. Sacred Scripture is also supernatural revelation, and also completed by the end of the apostolic age. But it was originally inspired by the Holy Spirit to be put into writing by persons whom we call the human authors of the Bible.

\* *Tradition* is an accepted term for the Church’s teaching authority, otherwise known as the magisterium. The magisterium is the Church’s right to instruct the world about the things of God. It is vested in the bishops, as successors of the apostles, under the Roman Pontiff, as successor of St. Peter. It is also vested in the pope, as the Vicar of Christ, and visible head of the Catholic Church. Just in passing, we should note that the doctrine which the Church’s magisterium teaches has been developing over the centuries since apostolic times. But there has been no development, in the sense of accretion, of divine revelation whose content remains constant until the dawn of eternity. Development of doctrine is the subjective growth in the Church’s understanding of God’s revealed truth; her growth in more clearly grasping what God has once and for all revealed; her certitude in never doubting this revealed truth; her practical application of divine revelation according to the changing circumstances in history and different cultures.

\* *Ecclesiastical traditions* are the variable customs, practices, rituals and ways in which the Church accommodates herself to the times and circumstances of different ages and different peoples. These traditions will consequently modify in living out the unchangeable faith and morality of Catholic Christianity.

There is nothing subtle about what Sacred Tradition means. It is all that God wanted to be told to mankind through inspired persons whose lives thus became the source of instruction and motivation for all future generations. It is called

Tradition, because the message of salvation from God through these saintly seers was passed on to us (Latin *tradere*, to hand on) orally. It is called Sacred, because the content of the message was the word of God, and therefore something holy.

We say this form of revelation was passed on orally. That is true, although it is not only what the prophets said, but what they did and how they lived that often spoke louder than the words they gave their contemporaries, and through these contemporaries to all future believers, even until the end of time.

## SACRED SCRIPTURE

We are now in a better position to see how Sacred Scripture is a form of revelation, but different from Sacred Tradition. Sacred Scripture is not only different but distinct and, in fact, unique.

Like Tradition, Scripture is Sacred because it comes from the all-holy God. It is Sacred because it is meant to sanctify all who accept it on faith and faithfully live up to its sometimes heavy demands. It is Sacred because its purpose is to lead the human race back to God who first created the human race out of nothing. It is finally Sacred because by their humble submission to what the Bible teaches, it forms believers on earth into the People of God and prepares them for citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem for which they were made.

But, unlike Tradition, the Bible is Scripture, because it was God's intention from the beginning to have it set down in written form. The Latin verb *scribere* means "to write," as the Latin noun *scriptum* means "that which is written."

One of the marvels of God's providence is that the art of phonetic writing, as we know it today, was invented not long before the Bible began to be composed. Equally marvelous is the fact that the phonetic alphabet was discovered in the present Near East, among the peoples whom we now designate as Semitic. And one more wonder: Much of mankind, even in our day, is largely illiterate, as it certainly was during the centuries when the Bible was being written. Yet God wanted His revealed word to be put in writing. Why? To provide all future ages with a definite, stable, and essentially unchangeable treasury of revealed truth. There is an ancient Latin proverb which says, *Scripta manent, verba volant*, that is,

“Things that are written remain, what is spoken flies away.”

Before we leave the present subject of “The Bible as revelation,” let us make sure we know what kind of revelation this is.

It is supernatural revelation, as was explained before. But more than that, the Bible (along with Sacred Tradition) is public and not merely private revelation. This means that what God revealed in the Scriptures is intended for all mankind, and not just for a single person or group of people. It is moreover intended for all places and all times, and not only for certain parts of the world or up to a certain age or stage of human history.

The Bible could not be public, in the sense here described, unless its message of salvation was completed at a point in past time, which the Church commonly says was at the end of the age of the apostles. As the last of the apostles who followed Christ passed into eternity, biblical revelation (along with Sacred Tradition) came to an end. It was finished. There is only one Incarnation and one Son of God, who became the Son of Mary, to redeem us from sin. There is only one substantial deposit of faith, based on the revelation which began with the first Adam, and was completed with the Second Adam, who is Jesus Christ.

However, the capstone to understanding how the Bible (like Sacred Tradition) is public, lies deeper still. No doubt the ways of God are mysterious, and there is no limit to the power of His self-communication. Over the centuries since the time of Christ, there have been saintly men and women whose spiritual experiences were forms of supernatural revelation from the Lord. Men like Francis of Assisi and John of the Cross, and women like Catherine of Sienna and Theresa of Avila, were only peaks in a range of mysticism that the Church has recognized as genuine and recommended to the faithful for acceptance and direction.

Yet, while unquestionably supernatural, these revelations given to the saints are merely private, no matter how widely known or respected they may be. How so? Unlike the public revelation of the Bible, they are not necessary for the salvation and sanctification of the human race. They are useful, but not essential. They are helpful, but not fundamental.

Biblical revelation is public because it is indispensable for everyone, including the saints. Without the Gospel of St. John, there would be no John of the Cross, and

without the epistles of St. Paul, there would be no Margaret Mary, to whom Christ revealed the secrets of His divine Heart.

## **Chapter II**

### **INSPIRATION IN THE BIBLE**

The English words “inspiration” and “inspired” have such a variety of meanings that we had better look at them more closely before going on to explain how the Bible is the inspired word of God.

We speak of the inspiration of genius in great scientists or poets, and of inspired works of art. We say that someone must have been inspired to make an important, perhaps historic decision. And we pray that God may inspire leaders in the Church or in civil society to know the divine will and to choose what is best for those under their care.

All these and similar uses of “inspiration” are correct enough. They all have in common the notion of outstanding gifts of nature or grace and perhaps the special assistance of the Spirit of God. They imply the presence and activity of a power from outside the inspired person and the conferral of light or insight that, alone, the inspired person would not possess.

The inspiration of the Bible includes all of the foregoing features, but it is simply in a category by itself. On a correct understanding of biblical inspiration finally rests the inestimable dignity of Sacred Scripture as the word of God in a way and to a degree that cannot be said of any other writing in the annals of history.

As before, we shall ask ourselves a series of questions and then go on to answer them at varying length.

- \* Where is biblical inspiration affirmed in the Bible?
- \* What is the Church’s official teaching?
- \* What does biblical inspiration mean?
- \* What are the implications?

### **TESTIMONY OF THE SCRIPTURES**

Throughout the Old Testament the underlying theme is that, although written by

human authors, the sacred books are the words of God Himself. In the prophet Hosea, God ascribes to Himself the authorship of the Pentateuch (Hosea 8:12). In the Acts of the Apostles, although a psalm was composed by David, it is ascribed to God, “Lord, you are He who by the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David ...have said” (Acts 4:24-25). In Hebrews, a psalm is quoted as God’s word, “And to the angels, He says, ‘Who makes the angels His spirits,’” (Hebrews 1:7). God as the Author of Old Testament statements is similarly identified elsewhere in the New Testament.

But the clearest passages affirming the divine inspiration of the Bible occur in Sts. Peter and Paul. They are classic.

“No prophecy of Scripture is made by private interpretation. For prophecy came not by the will of man at any time, but the holy men of God spoke inspired by the Holy Spirit” (1 Pt 1:2). In context, St. Peter is defending the divine origin of the New Testament revelation and goes back to the Old Law which, he declares, is likewise divinely inspired.

St. Paul’s letter to Timothy contains an exhortation to hold firm to the biblical word of God precisely because it comes from God, even though written by human authors.

Continue in the things which you have learned and have been assured of, knowing of whom you have learned them.

And that since childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:14-16).

The implication is clear enough. Because the Scriptures are the word of God they cannot fail, in spite of “evil men and seducers” who will try to deceive the faithful.

## **CHURCH’S TEACHING**

From the earliest days of the Church, there was need to emphasize the divine inspiration of the Bible. Already in apostolic times, Peter and Paul had to warn Christian believers to beware of those who claimed that the Scriptures had no more credibility than merely human literature.

Before the end of the first century, Pope Clement I had to tell the Corinthians that the sacred books are “true pronouncements of the Holy Spirit” (*Letter to the Corinthians*, 45).

As the faith of Christian Europe became established, the divinely inspired character of the Bible came to be taken for granted. So true was this that one Church Father after another assumed the fact and quoted the Scriptures with complete security as simply “the word of God.”

It was not until the thirteenth century, with the rise of universities and the spread of Islam with its Koran that the Church had to step in to reaffirm what had been taken for granted for over a thousand years.

At the General Council of Lyons (1274), the faithful were told to profess, “We believe that the one God and almighty Lord is the Author of the Old and New Testament of the Law and the Prophets and the Apostles, (quoted in the Decree of the Inquisition, July 3, 1907). When reunion with the separated Eastern Churches was planned, Pope Eugenius IV used similar language: “The Church of Rome,” he said, “professes God to be the Author of the Old and New Testament because the sacred writers of each testament spoke by the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit” (Decree of Union, 1439 A.D.).

At the time of the Reformation, the Council of Trent declared, “This Holy Synod accepts and venerates all the books of the Old and New Testament, each of which has the one God as its Author” (Session 4, Canon Of Scripture).

The First and Second Vatican Councils restated what the Council of Trent had said. The books of the Bible, “written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, have God as their author” (I Vatican, Session 3, Chapter 2; II Vatican, *Dei Verbum*).

## **HOW IS THE BIBLE INSPIRED?**

The most elaborate and authoritative explanation of how the Church understands biblical inspiration was given by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical on Sacred Scripture published in 1893. *Providentissimus Deus* remains the Church's standard on the subject to this day.

With the rise of biblical rationalism, Leo saw the devastating consequences of a mentality that treats the sacred text of the Bible as it would any other merely human writing.

First Pope Leo identified the two most glaring errors in rationalist biblical circles, namely:

- \* that divine inspiration applies only to those parts of Scripture which deal with faith and morals;
- \* that the sacred writers have erred anywhere in the Bible.

Then he went on to declare just what the Church means by teaching that God is the primary Author of the Bible.

Because the Holy Spirit employed men as His instruments, we cannot therefore say that it was these inspired instruments who, perhaps, have fallen into error and not the primary Author. For, by supernatural power, He so moved and impelled them to write – He was so present to them – that the things which He ordered and those only, first might be understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth. Otherwise it could not be said that He was the Author of the entire Scriptures.

On analysis, we see that there are three essential elements to biblical inspiration:

- There is a right understanding by the author of what God wants him to write.
- There is a free decision of the will by the author to want to write what he has been inspired to say.
- There is the use of suitable language by the author to express what he had decided to write.

Three human faculties, therefore, are under the inspiration of God in the composition of the Bible, that is, the mind, the will, and the power of execution.

The *mind* is divinely enlightened to know what God wants to be written. This does not mean that He has to give the writer a special revelation to tell him, here and now, what to write. Why not? Because the writer may already know, either from personal experience, as in the case of the evangelists Matthew and John, or from the testimony of others, as with Mark and Luke.

But even in these cases, God makes sure that what is in the writer's mind is the truth, either factual or intellectual; that it corresponds with reality.

Saying this, however, does not mean that God does not also give the writer supernatural revelation. When St. John wrote his Gospel with its profound insights into the Incarnation and the life of grace, or St. Paul wrote at such length on the Mystical Body and the power of Christ to redeem us from sin – these were certainly illuminations and had to be specially revealed to them by the Holy Spirit.

One more small but important point should be made. We commonly and correctly speak of the Bible as the revealed word of God. So it is. But then the question arises. If not everything in the Bible had to be supernaturally revealed to the original writers, how is the Bible still revelation?

We answer. The whole Bible is revelation to us because God supernaturally enlightened the sacred author on everything that God wanted him to write. Part of this content was previously unknown to the human scribe; it had to be revealed as to origin. Part of this content was already known to the human writer; but this too he was supernaturally told to choose out of a storehouse of available information on his mind.

Moreover, as will presently be seen, the biblical writers have further to be moved by the Spirit to want to write what He intends and as He wants it said. Again the action of God is beyond the natural order.

All of this shows that everything we then read in the Bible is divinely revealed as far as we are concerned. Why? Because God was behind and beneath everything that the Scriptures record. It was He who inspired its recording.

*The human will* of the sacred writers is moved by a divine impulse to set down exactly what the Spirit of God wants them to set in words.

A moment's reflection will show that this is a form of miraculous illumination. It meant the selective choice of only a bare fraction out of a myriad of facts, persons and events naturally known to the writer or accessible from others. It meant the supernatural infusion of ideas and information that only God could provide.

Finally, *the Holy Spirit guided* the human author to formulate what was to be said, in such language as to convey exactly what God wanted future generations to know.

Here we must distinguish between verbal and substantial inspiration. No doubt the Church speaks of God as dictating to the writer what he should say. For example, Pope St. Gregory the Great (quoted by Leo XIII) declares, "Most superfluous it is to inquire who wrote these things; we logically believe the Holy Spirit is the Author of the Bible. He wrote it who dictated the writing. He wrote it who inspired its execution" (*Preface to the Book of Job*, 2).

At the same time, the Church makes sure we realize that God does not substitute for the human writer. The latter uses such words as he knows, and such language as he is familiar with.

The sacred writers, moreover, spoke of things as they saw them and used everyday expressions even when strictly scientific accuracy would have required other forms of speech. In just the same way that modern astronomers speak of sunrise and sunset, thus the Bible calls bees (Sirach 11:3) and bats (Lev 11:19) birds, not in the strict sense, but in a general way as winged creatures.

How then, did God direct the executive faculties of the human agent? He did so in one of two ways. He either used the vocabulary which the author already had or provided him – as needed, with such words and turns of thought as were necessary to express precisely what the Holy Spirit wanted to be told. All the while, however, the human scribe remained who he was, with his gifts and limitations, and always with his free will unimpaired.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The practical consequences of biblical inspiration are immense. Once we realize that God is Author of the Scriptures, these things follow: 1) There are no errors in the Bible, 2) There are no contradictions within the Bible, 3) Every effort should be made to get back to the original biblical text which was divinely inspired, 4) Above all, the Bible must be treated with the utmost respect, in fact, with the reverence that God's revealed word requires. Each teaching, as explained by the Church, should become normative for every Christian believer.

**Inerrancy.** So much of modern biblical scholarship assumes that there are errors in the Bible that a Catholic may have to do violence to his mind to shake himself to think otherwise.

It is not surprising that so many nowadays take for granted that the Bible is full of inaccuracies and inconsistencies. Why should it not be, if it is just like any other secular literature although more important and more venerable than the rest?

Back in 1907, Pope St. Pius X had published a series of erroneous propositions, many of which dealt with the inerrancy of the Bible. Some examples illustrate the general direction of what the Holy See called "pernicious interpretations of the Sacred Scripture."

Those who believe that God is really the Author of Sacred Scripture display excessive simplicity or ignorance.

Divine inspiration is not to be so extended to the whole of Sacred Scriptures that it renders its parts, all and single, immune from all error.

The exegete, if he wishes to apply himself usefully to biblical studies, must first put aside all pre-conceived notions about the supernatural origin of Sacred Scripture, and interpret it as any other merely human documents.

In many of the narratives, the evangelists reported not so much things that are true, but things which, though false, they considered more profitable for their readers.

Given this mentality, it is no wonder that otherwise sincere biblical scholars

reached conclusions at variance with known Catholic doctrine. Nor is it strange that some would claim, “Heterodox exegetes have expressed the true sense of the Scriptures more fully than Catholic exegetes” (*Syllabus of Errors*, 19). The implication is that non-Catholics have no prejudice in favor of inerrancy in the Bible, and so they can be more objective in relying on the resources of biblical science.

All of these to the contrary notwithstanding, the Catholic position is uncompromising. It is synthesized in a famous statement of St. Augustine, writing to St. Jerome: “If in these books of the Bible, I meet anything which seems contrary to truth, I will not hesitate to conclude either that the text is faulty, or the translator failed to express the meaning of the passage, all that I myself do not understand” (Letter 77,1).

It stands to reason, illumined by faith, to think as Augustine did. But on one condition: that the Scriptures are considered sacred because they have God, who cannot err, as their Author.

**No Contradictions.** Once a person decides that the Bible is simply human, then those who wrote the biblical text were as subject to error and inconsistency as anyone else. Or more accurately, they fell into contradictions because they could err.

Consistent with these premises, much of modern exegesis deals with this problem of inconsistency. The Gospels are a favorite target for explaining this enterprise, and some of the conclusions are devastating.

If the Bible seems to be in open contradiction to known facts of history, or the physical sciences or archaeology, a Catholic has no choice. He will not be shaken in his faith in the Bible. He will try to find out exactly what the Bible is saying and, if need be, go back to the original language in which the Bible was written. He will scrutinize the translations. He will learn all he can about the customs and culture in which the disputed parts of the Bible were written. He will analyze the precise meaning of the words used by the author of a sacred book, and analyze the nuances of language and grammar. Above all, a Catholic faced with apparent contradiction in the Bible will ascertain what had been the original writer’s intention. Matthew’s purpose, for example, was not St. John’s, and St. Paul wrote his epistles from a different perspective than St. Peter.

One of the less well-known features of modern biblical research has been the astounding confirmation of the Bible's accuracy and consistency. Almost a century of excavating in the Near East has unearthed factual data that simply authenticates what the Catholic Church has always believed: that the Scriptures are, we may say, miraculously consistent within themselves and with all that human science has been able to discover.

**Original Text.** We know that the antiquity of our text of the Bible is greater than that of any comparably ancient literature.

No serious scholar would question the basic validity of the histories of Thucydides and Herodotus, or the writings of Plato and Aristotle, or the speeches of Cicero and the letters of Pliny. Yet, we do not now possess any manuscripts of these outstanding writers dating earlier than a thousand years after each of them had put their thoughts in written form.

On the other hand, we have codices of the entire Bible from the early fourth century of the Christian era, and substantial parts of the Gospels from as early as the first half of the second century.

This fact is both a tribute to the high regard in which the Bible was always held among believers and the special divine providence which safeguarded the original text of the Scriptures over the centuries.

At the same time, there is a stark realism in the Church's concern to keep going back as close to the first manuscripts as possible. Why so? Because human transcribers and translators are fallible. Moreover, as we shall see, from the beginning of the Christian era, there were some who were misled by erroneous opinions. Not a few produced spurious writings in competition with the inspired Scriptures. Still others tampered with the true Biblical text and, most notoriously, published translations that supported their own preconceived ideas.

We know the same Holy Spirit who first inspired the sacred authors has continued to direct the Church in safeguarding the written word of God. Part of this safeguarding, however, is the exercise of judicious prudence in evaluating any given text of the Bible. The norm of authenticity is the degree of agreement with the original Bible as inspired by God.

**Reverence for the Word of God.** All that we have so far said leads to our final practical conclusion. Although written by human scribes, the primary author of the Bible is God Himself.

Expressions like Sacred Scriptures, Holy Writ, merely symbolize the profound truth we are here exploring.

The Scriptures are holy because their main author is the all-holy God. But they are also holy because they are able to sanctify those who read the Bible as no other literature in the world is capable of doing.

St. Thomas does not hesitate to speak of the Scriptures as a kind of sacrament. Similar to what happens when we receive Baptism or the Eucharist, grace is conferred just because a person is baptized and because someone receives Holy Communion.

In a similar way, the mere devout reading of the inspired books confers extraordinary graces on the reader and listener. The Scriptures, we may say, have a built-in efficacy that far surpasses the plain words of the Old and New Testaments.

## Chapter III

### THE CANON OF THE BIBLE

Most people are not used to the expression, Canon of the Bible. Yet a correct understanding of what the Church means by the Canon, and how the biblical Canon came into existence, is of the essence of understanding the Bible.

From the earliest days of the Church, the term “canon” was used by the ancient Fathers to identify the inspired books. Literally the word is derived from the Greek *canon*, and means a rule or standard. You might say the Scripture Canon is the official list of books, which the Church recognizes as having the Holy Spirit for their principal Author.

If we further press the question and ask in what sense the Canon is a standard, two answers may be given. First of all, the canonical writings are the sole rule or standard for what is to be used by the Church in her liturgy and teaching. This was the generally accepted meaning by the earliest ecclesiastical writers. Another meaning of Canon is to say that the Bible is a norm or standard for the faith and for the practice of virtue by all believers.

It might be well to add that the word is used to identify Canon Law as a standard for all the Church’s legislation. Moreover, we speak of a person as canonized by the Church because he or she is a living norm by which others may guide their lives in order to attain eternal glory.

### THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

Some of the sacred books were written before the time of Christ and the rest after. As such, the Bible was completed by the beginning of the second century of the Christian era. The books written before the time of Christ are called the Old Covenant. Saint Paul used the word “Testament” instead of “Covenant” (II Corinthians 3:14).

The two terms “Covenant” and “Testament,” comes from the Latin translation of the Greek *Diatheke*, which word the Septuagint generally translates the Hebrew

*Berith* as Covenant.

Needless to say, the Jewish religion does not recognize the New Testament or New Covenant between God and His Chosen People.

There is some value, however, in explaining more clearly what the words Covenant or Testament mean. They mean a sacred agreement or contract that God established between Himself and His People. He promised them extravagant blessings, provided they remained faithful to Him and His laws. The synthesis of the Old Covenant was the Decalogue.

With the coming of Christ, God became man to set up a New Covenant with His People. Everything in the Gospels is a reflection of this new agreement, and it is perfectly synthesized in the eight Beatitudes.

The word "Testament" penetrated into Christianity, and with good reason. It signifies a last will or final disposing of property. Saint Paul in his letter to the Hebrews says that, "when there is a testament, the death of the testator must necessarily come" (Hebrews 9:16). Christ made His own last will and testament by the shedding of His blood. In His own words, when at the Last Supper He consecrated the chalice, He told the disciples, "Drink you all of it. For this is my blood of the New Testament which is shed for many for the remission of sins (Matthew 26:27-28).

Until Christ came and shed His blood, the Old Testament also involved the shedding of blood, but it was the blood of animals which the Jews offered up to God.

## **OLD TESTAMENTS**

Before we begin analyzing how the Old Testament Canon came into existence, we must first distinguish between the Jewish and the Catholic Canon. For one thing, our Catholic Canon of the Old Testament is more than what the Jews today consider Sacred Scriptures.

The earliest beginnings of the Jewish Canon are lost in obscurity. What we can safely say is that the whole literature of Israel after the time of Moses was an

outgrowth of the Mosaic law which thus became its foundation and framework. The entire Old Testament is thus built foursquare on the teachings of Moses.

In the absence of final Jewish authority, there was no single person who could pass judgment on which sacred books were divinely inspired.

The beginnings of a collection of the inspired books were made under Josue, when the book of Josue was added to the five books of Moses (Josue 24:26).

Among the Jews, it was the priests who were responsible for determining what books of the old law were written under God's special providence. This applies to all the books of the Old Testament. Over a period of many centuries, these books were declared authentic and thus became the standard of faith, worship, and morality among the Chosen People.

## **PALESTINIAN AND ALEXANDRIAN CANON**

We know that many of the Jews in pre-Christian times left Palestine to live elsewhere. Some had been driven into exile. Others chose to go elsewhere, especially to engage in business in distant parts of the world. Jewish coins from the seventh century before Christ have been found as far north as Scotland and as far south as South Africa.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Jewish colonies were established in many parts of the pre-Christian world. These colonies were in many ways autonomous enclaves of believers. Without the temple, as in Jerusalem, they nevertheless maintained a remarkable religious solidarity.

As might be expected, there were among these Jews of the dispersion many saintly persons. Some of these, in turn, were inspired by God and directed by Him to write what has since become part of the Old Testament.

Like the Jews in Palestine, those scattered in other parts of the world also had their Bible. It contained the Pentateuch, or five first books, as well as other sacred writings that have since come to be known as deutero-canonical, or second Canon. This second Canon is commonly associated with the city of Alexandria in Egypt.

Consequently, by the time of Christ, there were two Jewish Canons of the Bible: the Palestinian and the Alexandrian. Both Canons were highly regarded by the Jews, whether living in Palestine or dispersed throughout the civilized world. With the coming of Christ and the advent of Christianity, a radical change of attitude took place.

Jewish leaders came to exclude any book written outside of Palestine, or not in Hebrew, or not completed by a certain date, or (according to the Pharisees) not conforming to the basic ideas in the Pentateuch. As a result, seven entire books were eliminated.

We have record of a famous meeting of the Sanhedrin, held at Jamnia towards the end of the first century, where the Pharisees made some momentous decisions. For our purpose, the most important decision was to remove the deuterocanonical works from the Jewish Canon, and to order a totally new translation into Greek.

We know which books were eliminated. They were Baruch, Tobias, Judith, the first and second books of Maccabees, Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, and Wisdom, along with parts of Daniel and Esther.

Why did the Pharisees at Jamnia do this? The final reason is a mystery, but we can give a reasonable explanation, based on the fact that Christianity had come into existence. Jewish leaders were opposed to Christ and His followers. They openly criticized Christ during His whole public ministry. And after three years, successfully plotted His death on Calvary.

After Christ's Ascension, the same kind of opposition was leveled at the Apostles, who preached Christ, as seen in the persecution of St. Paul, who finally decided to turn to the Gentiles because they were so receptive to the Gospel message.

Moreover, and most significantly, there were some two hundred-seventy quotations from the Old Testament in the New. Most of the passages quoted were from the Alexandrian Canon.

Nevertheless, the Jewish Pharisees at the end of the first century, after the destruction of Jerusalem, ignored the longer Septuagint version. They defined, or in their own words, "put a fence around" what has ever since been the Jewish Scriptures.

When the Jewish Talmud, or explanation of Jewish law, was compiled (between the third and sixth centuries), it re-stated what the Jamnia Sanhedrin had decided. The Septuagint Canon was dropped. Also, a new translation into Greek was produced. Why a new translation? In order to ensure acceptance of the Palestinian Canon and avoid such embarrassing passages as Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah would be conceived by a virgin. The Greek translation produced by the Jews at the end of the first century, A.D., read "conceived by a young woman."

Since the earliest days of Christianity, the Alexandrian Canon was considered divinely inspired. Evidence for this fact abounds.

In the Catacombs, used before Constantine, there are many representations of scenes from The Old Testament, including some from the Septuagint. There are frescos showing the men in the fiery furnace, Habakuk bringing food to Daniel, Tobias with the fish and his guide Raphael, and scenes from Judith and Esther.

In the Church's controversy with heretics, both sides quoted from writings of the Alexandrian Canon. For example, at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., the book of Judith was simply treated as canonical.

The earliest Fathers of the Church quoted at length from the so-called deuterocanonical books and identified them as the Scriptures.

In the same way, the early Popes published a list of the Old and New Testament books which were identical with those that the Catholic Church now uses in her teaching and liturgy.

By the fifth century, however, some voices were raised questioning the inspired character of some Old Testament books. Among the critics was Saint Jerome, along with a few others, when the Council of Trent (1546-630) convened. One of Trent's main tasks was to declare once and for all what books belong to the Bible and which ones do not. Needless to say, the biblical Canon of the Council of Trent was the same as the one which the Church had taught and used since the post-apostolic age. It definitely included the deuterocanonical books which were excluded by the Jews after the time of Christ.

One of the main reasons why the Council of Trent issued its definitive list of books

in the Bible was to preserve the integrity of the Catholic faith. The Protestant founders had decided to adopt the biblical Canon of the Jews. In doing so, they consciously denied the authority of the Catholic Church to identify the content of the biblical revelation.

## **NEW TESTAMENT**

The early Christians came into existence as a believing community by their fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles. And they set equal value on both the oral and written forms of apostolic instruction.

It was not long, however, before Christian believers were pressed to make a decision on which writings were truly apostolic, and which were not.

Saint Luke speaks of many who had undertaken to write a life of Christ. We know that Saint Paul warned the people against those who proclaimed a Gospel different from the one that He had given them.

How are the faithful able to recognize authentic apostolic writing? They do so according to two norms:

---Was the book in question known to be of apostolic origin? In other words, was it written by an Apostle or commissioned for writing by an Apostle?

---Was the book accepted as of apostolic origin either by the local church where it was written or to which it was addressed?

Evidently not every Christian community in apostolic times possessed every book written by the Apostles. The diffusion of the apostolic writings was hindered by well-grounded suspicions of their authenticity, by the poverty of most Christians, by the difficulties of travel and transport, as well as by the constant danger of persecution.

Soon another problem arose, with the rise of heresies. We have record of no less than twenty-five books, all claiming to be the Gospels. This was in addition to a variety of Acts and Epistles, allegedly produced by one of the Apostles.

In spite of all of this competitive writing, however, certain books of the New Testament were regarded as authentic from the beginning. These were the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen letters of Saint Paul, and the first letters of Peter and John.

The remaining seven books of the New Testament were known in some congregations from the beginning, and gradually became recognized everywhere. These are the Epistles of James and Jude, and finally the Apocalypse.

One sign of our early Canon of the New Testament was established in the earliest Latin translation called *Itala*. At least partially completed by the end of the first century, the *Itala* contains all our New Testament books.

The authority of the Bishop of Rome did not at first have to be invoked in this matter, until after the liberation of the Church under Constantine.

Pope Saint Damasus, was the first Pope who, in 374 A.D., issued a complete list of the books of the Old and New Testaments. The Canon of Damasus coincides exactly with the present biblical Canon taught by the Catholic Church.

In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent repeated word for word the list of inspired books as identified twelve hundred years before by Pope Saint Damasus. Trent's decision marked a turning point in the history of the Bible. With no exceptions, all the original founders of Protestantism rejected one or more of the books of the Bible, accepted by the Catholic Church before the sixteenth century.

In the Old Testament, the Protestant founders simply reduced the number of inspired books to what the Jews after Christ decided is Sacred Scripture.

In the New Testament, Martin Luther told his followers they could think what they liked about the Apocalypse of Saint John. He also spoke against the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Epistle of Jude, and with special virulence against the Epistle of James. Other Protestant originators were opposed to other books. One of the less familiar aspects of Protestantism was disagreement, not only on the meaning of certain key passages in the Bible, but on what belongs to the Bible, especially in the New Testament.

It was not until the end of the sixteenth century that Protestants began to agree on

the New Testament Canon. By now they substantially accept the New Testament of the Roman Catholic Church.

## **Chapter IV**

### **HOW THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS ARE RELATED**

Most people assume that the Old and New Testaments of the Bible are somehow related. The oldest manuscripts of the Scriptures regularly bind together the books of both Testaments, with the Old coming before the New. Also from the Church's earliest history, readings from the two Testaments formed part of the liturgy in celebrating the Holy Eucharist and administering the seven sacraments.

With the biblical renaissance started by the Second Vatican Council, it becomes more important than ever to better understand how the whole Bible is connected and, with emphasis, how the two Covenants are interrelated.

For the sake of convenience, we shall look at our subject from various viewpoints. There is some overlapping among them, but they are sufficiently distinct to be treated separately. With regard to the Old Testament, the New Testament may be considered as its fulfillment, perfection, continuation, interpretation, completion, development, and most importantly, its Incarnation.

### **FULFILLMENT**

The most basic relationship of the New Testament is to see it as the fulfillment of the Old. Underlying this fact is God's mysterious providence, which selectively chose a single group of people from among the Gentiles in order to fulfill through them His designs for the salvation of the world.

Seen from this perspective, the Old Testament becomes a series of prophecies, which came to pass in the first century of the Christian era. Or again, the Old Testament foretold the coming of the Messiah and the birth of His kingdom. And the New Testament witnessed His actual coming with the establishment of the Church, which in Christ's language is the kingdom.

At the heart of the Old Testament is the virtue of hope. The Chosen People are told by the Lord in a thousand ways, and in a thousand ways are told to be patient, to wait, because the Holy One of Israel will surely come to deliver His people from

the hands of their enemies. He will found the kingdom that will never end.

On both accounts, the New Testament testifies to this prophecy of hope being fulfilled.

## **PERFECTION**

Consistent with its constant look to the future, the Old Testament implies that the moral code preached by the prophets would be perfected beyond telling when the Messiah came into the world.

This is, in fact, the theme of Christ's Sermon on the Mount. In a series of comparisons, He began each contrast with the expression, "You have learned how it was said," or "It has been said." Then the Savior quotes one after another of the moral precepts of the Old Law. Six times there is the same introduction, and six times Christ then declares, "But I say this to you," and He proceeds to raise the Mosaic Code far above anything that was demanded of the people of Israel.

The New Testament, therefore, perfects the Old to such a degree that this factor alone becomes the cornerstone of Christian morality. Having commanded His followers to rise above the ancient Decalogue in the practice of patience, and chastity, and the highest form of charity, the Savior also provided the supernatural means necessary to live up to the heavy demands He makes on His followers.

The single example of Christ's perfecting the sixth Commandment of God illustrates the principle.

It has also been said: "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a writ of dismissal." But I say this to you: everyone who divorces his wife, except for the case of fornication, makes her an adulteress, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Mt 5:31-32).

Words could not be clearer. Marriage among the Jews permitted divorce with a right to remarry. Christ restored marriage to its original monogamous state—what no other founder of a religion in history has even claimed to do. Then, to provide the necessary graces required to practice monogamy, Christ raised marriage to the level of a sacrament in order to make possible what is naturally impossible to

observe.

## CONTINUATION

The present-day division of the Bible into the Old and New Testaments goes back to St. Paul. He strove so valiantly, yet with small success, to convince his former co-religionists that the Messiah had indeed come, and lived and died and rose from the dead.

As Christians, we have grown up with the two parts of the Bible and take them for granted. There is no telling what names would now be given to the two Covenants if the Jews had accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

Speculation aside, it is most important practically to see the New Testament is literally a continuation of the Old.

What does this mean? It means that, in the mind of God, the public revelation that He decided to give the human race is a historical *continuum*. It began with our first parents, to whom God spoke and revealed His will, and was completed with the end of the apostolic age.

There is no break in revealed sequence from Genesis to the Apocalypse, and no interruption in the message of salvation from God to His people in all these centuries.

Might God have done otherwise? Of course. But He chose to stretch out, as it were, His revelation over a long period of time, in a succession of truths. All of this culminated in the person of Christ. St. Paul again had a clear notion what this means.

At various different times in the past and in various ways, God spoke to our ancestors; but in our own time, the last days, He has spoken to us through His Son, the Son that He has appointed to inherit everything, and through whom He made everything there is (Hebrews 1:1-2).

From this perspective, we see that God, for reasons best known to Himself, did not

disclose Himself all at once, but only gradually. Nor did He reveal Himself only through messengers, but also personally, nor only for the people of a certain place or period of history, but for everyone and all times.

There is great wisdom in seeing the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. The implications are enormous. This biblical continuity is not only logical or chronological. It is part of the mystery of salvation. In a profound sense, we can say that the two Testaments belong together, and nothing within either Testament is, as the expression goes, outdated or unimportant. The continuity is God's own way of manifesting Himself and His will to all generations, even though the events described or the message taught occurred several thousand years ago.

## **INTERPRETATION**

The total vocabulary of both Testaments is less than one-third the number of words used by Shakespeare. By any standard, the Bible is not a sophisticated work, and its language is remarkably simple. But for that very reason, the biblical text has to be interpreted correctly.

In a later context, we will examine at length the basic norms for sound biblical interpretation, provided by the Founder of Christianity when He founded the Church.

Our present concern is to see how the Bible is, in a way, its own interpreter; and specifically how the New Testament is divinely intended to shed light on the Old.

There is more here than meets the eye. We are not merely saying that many Old Testament messages are quoted in the New Testament and, in the process, the hidden meaning of a verse in the Psalms is disclosed in the Gospel of Matthew.

Certainly that is one and a most valuable purpose of the New Testament. Every quotation from the Old Testament in the New, and even every reference, provides a key to explaining what the Holy Spirit meant when He inspired the writing of Genesis, or Isaiah, or the Book of Wisdom or the Psalms.

But more than that, the New Testament as a whole is a divinely provided means of

interpreting the entire Old Testament. It was one and the same Spirit who directed the writing of both Testaments. We may therefore be sure that He wants us to learn what He revealed before the time of Christ by penetrating ever more deeply what He revealed after the coming of Christ.

We go one step further. Who would claim that the New Testament is self-explanatory and does not need to be interpreted? It is here that the Old Testament becomes so useful to believing Christians. Christ and His life and teaching, the Church He founded and her role as universal sacrament of salvation, are already anticipated in the sacred books of the Old Covenant. They tell us a great deal more about the mysteries of Christianity than we should ever know if we ignored the inspired teaching of the Old Testament.

Time and again, the Savior quotes from the writings of the ancient prophets and draws on the biblical events of the past. This is so true that, without the Old Testament which is imbedded in the New, there would not be a New Testament as it exists in the world today.

“It is written in the prophets,” Christ declared, “they will all be taught by God, and to hear the teaching of the Fathers and learn from it, is to come to me” (John 6:45).

Whatever the prophet wrote was implicitly about Christ. To read the prophets, therefore, is to learn about Him. And conversely, to read what the evangelists say about Christ is to deepen one’s understanding of the prophets.

## **COMPLETION**

To say that the New Testament is a completion of the Old includes all that we have so far seen. But there is something distinctive about seeing the Gospel as finishing and, in that sense, completing God’s revelation to mankind.

The New Testament completes divine revelation because everything necessary for our salvation and sanctification has been communicated.

The New Testament completes the Old because there will be no other public revelation to mankind until the end of the world.

The New Testament completes the Old because, in God's providence, every promise of Yahweh about Christ was totally realized in the Son of God who became, as foretold, the Son of Mary.

The New Testament completes the Old because the full treasury of graces predicted by the prophets was opened to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

There is probably no single term in Catholic theology that is more frequently used (and abused) than the word "development."

This is quite understandable in today's world of science, business and industry. We speak of developed and undeveloped countries, of progress in understanding the physical laws of nature, and using this newly discovered knowledge to improve man's cultural and material well-being on earth.

It is not surprising, then, that the notion of development would also enter the field of religion and of man's relationship to God.

But the moment we say this, we must carefully distinguish two very different kinds of religious development. One is called development of doctrine, and the other development of revelation.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE**

In a single declarative sentence, development of doctrine is growth in the Church's understanding of God's revelation. It is called development because there is progress, subjectively, in the minds of believers whose knowledge of the revealed word has become clearer and deeper under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Take any mystery of the faith, like the Real Presence, or the life of grace, or the papal primacy, or the sacrament of penance. All of these mysteries are now more fully grasped, and their bearing on human lives more effective, than they were even a generation ago.

Doctrinal development is also called dogmatic progress, to bring out the fact that no new truths are being communicated by God. Rather, our grasp of the truths once and for all revealed becomes more intelligible, and correspondingly more influential, in our service of God.

Doctrine or dogma, as we know, is the Church's teaching of what God has revealed. Through prayer, experience, and study, doctrines or dogmas will develop. This is not, however, by accretion or addition of new mysteries of faith, but by new insights conferred by the Holy Spirit and approved by the Church as authentically Catholic.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF REVELATION**

In historical sequence, development of doctrine began when development of revelation ended. Again in a single declarative statement, development of revelation is the gradual unfolding of divine truth, from the origins of the human race to the close of the apostolic age.

The entire time span during which this gradual unfolding took place covered many millennia. We know that God's first communication of Himself and His will was to our first parents. It continued through the course of human history as Sacred Tradition. Then, with the rise of the Jewish people, it was written under Divine inspiration as the beginnings of the Bible.

The books of the Old Testament were produced gradually. They were not all written at the same time. And their message of salvation was only gradually unfolded to the Chosen People.

It is not difficult to trace the succession of ideas from Genesis and the Pentateuch through the ages – religious poetry like the Psalms, followed by the writings of the prophets, and culminating in such books as Esdras, Esther, Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom, shortly before the coming of Christ.

To be stressed is the fact that all through the Old Testament there was a true development of revelation. Each succeeding prophet or scribe shed further light on truths already revealed and, we may say, added new truths which never contradicted the religious truths already believed.

As we approach the New Testament, the degree and depth of development of revelation is extraordinary. At the Last Supper the night before He died, Jesus told His disciples: "I shall not call you servants anymore, because a servant does not know His master's business. I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father" (John 15:15).

Christ is hereby declaring that His advent in the world has changed the whole course of history. Speaking toward the end of His mortal life on earth, He had by then revealed most of what He wanted the Apostles to share with others even to the end of time.

It is impossible to identify all that Christ made known to us far and beyond anything that we find in the Old Testament. Indeed, we can correctly say that while the Old Testament contains many mysterious truths, it does not contain any strict mysteries.

What is a strict mystery? From our side, it is some truth revealed by God whose inner essence or meaning is above our comprehension. From God's side, the fundamental mystery is God Himself as the eternal Community of Three Divine Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All other mysteries of Christianity flow from this one, as expressions of God's Trinitarian love, even as all other mysteries lead to the possession of the Trinity as the destiny for which we were made.

The New Testament disclosure of the Trinity is a development of revelation which exceeds even the highest reaches of the Old Covenant. It is no wonder that Christ, on Ascension Thursday, commissioned the Apostles to "make disciples of all the nations...and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you." But that would be impossible unless the followers of Christ were empowered by the Holy Trinity. They received the power to keep the commandments of Christ, when, as He prescribed, they are baptized, "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

This brings us to the end-point of contrast between the Old and the New Testament, namely the Incarnation.

## **INCARNATION**

Both Testaments are divinely inspired sources of God's communication to the human family. It is the same Yahweh who created the world, as described in Genesis, and who is the glory of the saints in the heavenly Jerusalem as foretold in the Apocalypse.

There is an enormous difference, however, between the two Testaments. The difference is that in the Old Testament, "God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets." But in the New Testament, "He has spoken to us through His Son" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

It is here that the believing Catholic stands quite alone in the modern world. Those who profess Judaism deny, on principle, that Yahweh became man and dwelt among us; that He lived and died and rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us.

Those who profess Islam, some eight hundred million Moslems, respect Jesus as a great messenger of Allah, but they too deny that Allah has a natural Son who became the Son of Mary.

Moreover, many who profess to be Christians are like the Jews and Moslems in not professing faith in Jesus Christ as "True God from true God, one in being with the Father."

As Catholics we believe without qualification that God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ with an intimacy that we cannot comprehend. God became one of us in all things but sin, in order to evoke from us a corresponding love in return. In practice, our love for God is to be shown in doing all that Christ, the God-man, has commanded us to do.

What makes the Gospels so precious is that they make the practice of virtue so simple; not easy, but simple. All that a person has to do is honestly believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the all-holy God in human form. Every virtue practiced by Him was really a divine attribute made visible and audible and tangible in our midst.

In the Old Testament, Yahweh never tired telling the Israelites how to behave. The Ten Commandments are a synthesis of this teaching of morality.

Prophet after prophet was sent to the Chosen People to remind them of their duties and rebuke them for their failings. Time and again, the prophets were ignored, and more than one was put to death by those who would not listen and obey.

Then God became man and lived among us not only to redeem us by His passion and death on Calvary. It was also, and with emphasis, to show us the way. He not only told us to practice humility, patience, and obedience, and poverty, and chastity and selfless charity. He lived these virtues and gave us the assurance that, provided that we believe in Him and trust in His grace, we too will become humble and patient and generous like Him.

## Chapter V

### THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

Over the centuries since Christ left the earth in visible form, the Bible has been a most effective unifying force in Christianity. Christ's prayer of unity among His followers has been heard beyond all human expectations and, to this day, the Church appeals to her basic unity as a mark of her authenticity. The Bible has contributed substantially to preserving this oneness among the faithful in a world that is notoriously disunified.

Saying this, however, is only half the story. The same Sacred Scriptures that have been a mainstay of Christian unity can also be the seedbed of conflict and disunity. It depends on how the Scriptures are interpreted.

As we enter this crucial area, it is more than ever necessary to keep the issues clear. Much of the conflict among Christians in our day is due to variant explanations of key passages in the Bible. Consequently, every effort to better understand biblical interpretation is a step in the direction of retaining and restoring Christian solidarity.

#### SCIENCE OF HERMENEUTICS

The term *hermeneutics* is the technical name for the science of interpreting the Bible. The word comes from the Greek *hermeneuein*, which means to interpret or expound, and identifies the art (or science) of making plain the meaning of what someone has written.

There is obviously more need to explain a piece of writing the more remote an author is from the time and place of his readers, and the more the ideas and circumstances of his age and country differ from their own. On each of these counts, the Bible requires careful interpretation if the message it is meant to convey will not be lost on the people of our day.

The seventy-three books that the Catholic Church considers inspired have much in common with other ancient writing. They were composed in ancient languages,

now unfamiliar to most of the human race. They were written under circumstances of time and place very different from our own. The language of the East, and certainly the pre-Christian Near East, is strange to us. Also the numerous metaphors and literary illustrations are foreign to Western culture. It would therefore be foolhardy to try to read the Bible as we might some modern author, and expect to understand the sacred writers without considerable assistance.

But there is another level to interpreting Holy Writ. Unlike any other ancient writing, the Bible was supernaturally inspired by God. He is the main Author of the sacred books, and He continues to assist those who read the Scriptures with docility to the word of God.

It is precisely here that the Catholic Church has been so uncompromising. She teaches two things:

--The same Holy Spirit who first inspired the sacred authors of the Bible continues to enlighten those who now read the Bible.

--However, the Holy Spirit gives His light in two ways, personally to the individual reader and corporately to the hierarchical Church to whom Christ entrusted the Bible.

These two ways of being enlightened are related as condition and consequence. The Holy Spirit gives His grace of understanding the Scriptures to those people who are willing to be guided by the Church in their interpretation of the biblical texts. The Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself. He will never tell an individual something contrary to what the Church teaches. Rather, He will confer special graces of insight into the meaning of the Bible on those who are ready to submit their private judgment—and private inspiration—to the judgment of the Church.

## **BASIC MEANINGS**

Before we go on to further explore the science of hermeneutics, we should say something about the possible meanings that a given passage in the Bible may have.

In general, we distinguish a two-fold sense in Holy Scripture: the literal and the

mystical.

**The literal sense** is that which the actual words in the Bible convey. This again may be precise or metaphorical.

The precise literal sense is the meaning which the written words, taken at face value, signify. For example:

Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran (Genesis 12:4).

Jesus then went into the Temple and drove out all those who were selling and buying there (Mt 21:12).

Late that night, Paul and Silas were praying and singing God's praises, while the other prisoners listened. Suddenly there was an earthquake that shook the prison to its foundations (Acts 16:25-26).

The literal metaphorical sense is that which the words directly convey when taken as figures of speech. Thus Our Lord is variously called a lion, a lamb, or a vine. These terms are not meant to be taken strictly but figuratively. There is a true sense in which Christ is a lion, to designate His courage; He is a lamb in His meekness and readiness to be sacrificed; and He is the vine from whom we as branches derive the graces we need to reach heaven.

We may have to make some adjustment of thought to understand that the word "literal" when applied to the Bible can mean either "proper and ordinary" or "figurative" and "metaphorical." In other words, the literal sense of the words of Scripture is the sense intended by the human sacred author. For our purpose, he is equally literal when he says that Jesus is the Son of Mary (literal proper and ordinary meaning) or that Jesus is a lamb (literal figurative and metaphorical meaning).

**The mystical sense** is also called the spiritual sense. What does it mean? It means that the same passage in Scripture which means one thing literally, as intended by the human writer, can have a second, deeper meaning intended by the Holy Spirit who inspired the human author.

The human writer need not even know of this higher or deeper meaning when he

composes the sacred book. Nevertheless, God intends to say more than the human scribe realizes. This “more” which the Holy Spirit wants to communicate is an important part of the Catholic understanding of biblical interpretation. As explained by St. Thomas, “In Sacred Scripture, the truth is manifested in two ways. One way is according to what the words themselves signify; this is the literal sense. Another way is where things prefigure certain other things, and in this consists the spiritual sense” (*Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, VII, 14).

Thus the human writer has nothing to do with producing a spiritual sense in Scripture. It is exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit.

Take the passage from the Gospel of St. John, read in the Mass of the Sacred Heart. St. John related how the soldiers refrained from breaking the legs of Jesus because He was already dead. Then he adds (John 19:36), “These things were done that the Scripture might be fulfilled: ‘You shall not break a bone of Him’ (Exodus 12:46).” As we read the passage in Exodus, it refers to the paschal lamb eaten by the Jews at the time of their deliverance from Egypt. On what grounds could the evangelist say that the ancient paschal ritual was fulfilled in Christ? On the supposition that when God first prescribed the eating of the Passover, and inspired the writer of Exodus to describe the ritual, He had in mind, centuries before the event, how Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross would save the human race from eternal death. All the essential details of the first Passover—persons, places and events—were types of what more than a millennium later would be fulfilled in the Passion and Death of the Savior. Technically we call these fulfillments the antitypes.

Immediately we see that the Bible is filled with passages revealing the spiritual sense of Scripture. Perhaps the preferred term is “mystical” sense, to bring out the fact that God has, as it were, fulfilled the Bible with mysteries that lie hidden beneath the literal meaning of the inspired text.

It is not our purpose here to analyze this spiritual or mystical sense in great detail. However, some further observations should be made. They can be reduced to three questions:

- (1) How extensive is the spiritual sense of Scripture? Some commentators would see the entire Old Testament, in its every passage, as a mystical prelude to the New Testament. The best

answer is to say that the Old Testament *as a whole* prefigures the New Testament, and the Bible itself gives us not a few types from the Old Law that are beautifully fulfilled the New. But to suppose that every single person, event and statement in the Old Testament prefigures something identifiable in the New is to say more than the Catholic Church has ever claimed or taught.

- (2) How much of the New Testament contains mystical passages that are open to a spiritual interpretation? Some have gone to the extreme of claiming that, since Christ and His message of salvation is the fulfillment of the Old Law, we should not look for any mystical truths in the New Testament that somehow prefigure the future.

This is to claim too little. True enough, there will be no new content to God's public revelation for the whole world. But Christ Himself foretold that the Holy Spirit would teach us the meaning of what He, the Savior, had told us. There is such a thing as doctrinal development or dogmatic progress. This means that what has once and for all been revealed by Jesus Christ will continue to open up new vistas of understanding and depth, under the light of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church's teaching authority. Passage after passage of the Gospels is now grasped more clearly and penetratingly than ever before. We can therefore safely say that, when God originally inspired the writing of the New Testament, He had in view these ever greater depths of meaning implicitly present in the first century, but only now coming to such light as was never available before.

- (3) Are there passages in the Old Testament that prefigure Christ and His kingdom after the last day? Yes, what may be called eschatological truths are taught by the mystical sense of the Old Law.

Thus the Psalms and the prophecies of Isaiah not only foretell

the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom in time, but they prefigure the final advent of Christ on the last day and predict the fulfillment of the Kingdom of David that will never end.

The New Testament is nothing if not focused beyond time into eternity. The same Christ who was born in poverty in Bethlehem will return in glory to reward with everlasting life those who had believed in Him and practiced charity in this life.

But only in the final revelation of the beatific vision, will we see as the Apostle tells us, what God has prepared for those who love Him. In that respect, where the New Testament is a fulfillment of the Old in time, the New Jerusalem in the City on High will be the fulfillment of the New Testament in eternity.

## TEACHING OF SECOND VATICAN

Given the new emphasis on Sacred Scripture since the Second Vatican Council, it is not surprising that the Council said some very important things about the proper interpretation of the Bible. In the dogmatic constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), the council set some definite norms to guide Catholics in their intelligent approach to explaining the revealed written word of God.

**The Meaning of the Human Writers.** The first directive to Catholics is perfectly obvious.

Seeing that, in Sacred Scripture, God speaks through men in human fashion, it follows that the interpreter of Sacred Scriptures, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meanings which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words (*Dei Verbum*, 12).

The history of Biblical interpretation shows that this simple directive is not as easy to put into practice as may seem. One reason is that human nature tends to read into the Bible what the reader wants to find. Nineteen centuries of conflict with heterodoxy shows how eager people are to project their own preconceived ideas

into the inspired text. From Arius to Nestorius, from Hus to Cranmer, and from Jansenius to Loisy, human genius has exhausted itself in its effort to justify on biblical grounds what, time has shown, have been the subjective notions of a dissident spirit, instead of the objective teachings of the Bible.

As we have seen, there are two things to look for in any authentically Catholic interpretation of the Bible: the intention of the human writer and the intention of the Holy Spirit, the primary Author. Always implied in biblical hermeneutics is that the intention of the human writer was guided by the Holy Spirit, yet in such a way that the scribe remained free to express himself in truly human fashion. His ideas and insights, his outlook and expressions were not erased by divine inspiration.

At this point, the Council goes to some trouble to explain how, practically, we can arrive at the intention of the human author of the books of the Bible. Among other things, “Attention must be paid to literary forms.” Why literary forms? In order to find out what meaning the sacred writer “in a determined situation, and given the circumstances of his time and culture, intended to express and did in fact express, through the medium of a contemporary literary form” (*Dei Verbum*, 12).

This is common sense. Different cultures even in the same period of history have different ways of expressing their thoughts and of showing their emotions. Separate these cultures by one generation, or one century, or a millennium, and the differences can be enormous. To take these historical and cultural factors into consideration in interpreting the meaning of biblical passages is to recognize there is more to “language” than just the sound of words or the shape of writing in a manuscript.

Still more practically, the council tells us.

Rightly to understand what the sacred author wanted to affirm in his work, due attention must be paid both to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer, and to the conventions which the people of his time followed in their dealings with one another” (*Dei Verbum*, 12).

This directive reinforces the need to make an in-depth study of every aspect of the times in which a piece of biblical writing was composed. The more specific this

knowledge, and the more definite the information about the “persons, places and practices” of the society for whom the human author was writing, the closer we come to grasp not just the broad generalities of a scriptural text, but its precise shades of meaning and even minute nuances.

**The Intention of the Holy Spirit.** Parallel with the need for making a thorough study of the human factors of the biblical text, is the more serious need to penetrate into the divine intentions of the Holy Spirit. The Council sets down four basic norms to arrive at some understanding of the mind of God as the principal Author of the Scriptures.

Says the Council, “attention must be paid to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, taking into account the Tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith” (*Dei Verbum*, 12).

The first norm of grasping the intention of God as the main Author of the Bible, is “the content...of the whole Bible.” What does this mean? It means that if we are to know what God intends to say in any passage of the Bible, we must interpret this in the light of what the whole rest of the Bible says.

How is this a norm for understanding what the Holy Spirit wants to communicate in a particular event or statement in Scripture? Very simple. The first rule for understanding what the Holy Spirit is saying, for example, in the Annunciation narrative in St. Luke, is to know what the Bible tells us elsewhere and, in fact, throughout the Old and New Testaments, about the Incarnation. In other words, you do not really grasp the mind of God in the Bible in isolation. The whole content of the whole of Scripture is the first, and obvious, interpreter of any one biblical incident or statement. Thus almost every word of the Annunciation story has antecedents going back to the first chapters of Genesis and through the entire Old Testament. And, almost every word of this account in Luke’s Gospel has consequences reaching to the last words of the Apocalypse.

The second norm, we are told, for getting to know what God intends to reveal in any one part of the Bible is an extension of the first norm. Consider the Bible, with all its variety and multiplicity as yet one marvelous unity. It was one and the same Spirit who inspired Genesis and Exodus, Isaiah and the Psalms, the Gospels of Matthew and John, the letters of St. Paul and the Book of Revelation.

God not only cannot contradict Himself, but He is His own best interpreter. Why did He inspire the writing of so many, and such humanly different sacred books? One reason was certainly to give us a means of better understanding what He is saying in one book or passage by seeing it in the light of another book or passage.

There is a wonderful coherence among the inspired biblical writings. Each is part of a unified whole.

But, we ask, how does this second norm of *unity*, differ from the first norm of *content*? Or in more prosaic terms, how does the unified coherence of the whole Bible prove a standard of interpretation distinct from the content of the Bible?

It provides a new and distinct norm by telling us not only that any single part of the Scriptures should be viewed as just that, only a *part* of a larger and more complete whole. It further tells us that every part is related to every other part, and the parts have been woven together by the Wisdom of God to form, a tapestry of divine revelation.

Moreover, we can without much difficulty discern unifying themes in the Bible. Each theme runs through both Testaments as a thread of unity to provide insights and a grasp of the biblical message that would otherwise either be meaningless or certainly less meaningful.

Take the fact of sin. Early in the Bible, we are told that our first parents disobeyed God. They had been threatened with death if they disobeyed. Having sinned, they were also mysteriously promised eventual redemption. Driven out of the Garden of Eden, they became the parents of the rest of mankind and, as St. Luke tells us, also the ancestors of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race.

Given the fact of sin, first of Eve and Adam and then of their progeny to the time of Christ and the Apostles, one biblical event after another, one biblical doctrine after another takes on meaning and “makes sense.” So true is this that, apart from sin, the Bible does not “make sense” except perhaps as a series of interesting (or not so interesting) episodes, and beautiful poetry or literary prose.

The third conciliar norm for interpreting the Bible as the word of God is “taking into account the Tradition of the entire Church.” It is no exaggeration to say that this single norm is at the heart of authentic Catholic exegesis.

The term “Tradition” here has at least three layers of meaning.

It means first of all Tradition as part of God’s revelation, co-extensive with Scripture, and an indispensable standard for interpreting the Bible. Thus the Catholic Church believes there are seven sacraments, relying partly on Scripture but also on Sacred Tradition that Christ instituted seven channels of Grace which confer the grace they signify.

Tradition as a norm of biblical interpretation secondly means the Church’s official teaching, binding on all the faithful, as taught over the centuries by the ecumenical councils and/or by the Popes in exercising their supreme jurisdiction as Vicars of Christ and successors of St. Peter.

Finally Tradition as a guide to understanding the revealed written word of God is the Church’s ordinary teaching authority, vested in the bishops united among themselves and in union with the Bishop of Rome. This norm is so sweeping in its implications as to scandalize those outside of communion with the Catholic Church. How so? It includes the Church’s rites and practices, catechisms and prayer books, her by now millions of word of print—as authorized by the Catholic hierarchy and approved by the Roman Pontiff.

On all three levels of meaning just seen, Tradition is par excellence the guide to explaining what God is saying in the Bible. So much so, that without Tradition we would not even know what is, and what is not the Bible. There were twenty-five Gospels in circulation in the early Christian era, and countless Acts, Epistles and Apocalypses. Without the Church’s Tradition to decide what books belong to the Bible, no one could be sure what books were inspired and which were apocryphal. A sad evidence of this is that, to this day, the Bible of Protestantism lacks seven whole books of the Old Testament because their sixteenth century ancestors decided to follow the post-Christian Jewish tradition rather than the Tradition of the Roman Catholic Church.

The fourth and final norm for interpreting the Bible, given by the Second Vatican Council, is “the analogy of faith.” In one sentence, the analogy of faith may be defined as the Catholic doctrine that every individual statement of belief must be understood in the light of the Church’s whole objective body of faith.

We might say the analogy of faith is the consistency of faith. Whatever the Catholic Church believes is consistent with everything else she believes. There are no areas of objective discord or inconsistency. As a rule of biblical interpretation, therefore, this means that to understand anything in the Bible, look at the rest of the Catholic faith. This faith forms, as it were, the context for explaining the texts of the Bible. In order for a given Scripture interpretation to be valid, on Catholic grounds,

- it may not contradict anything that the Church officially teaches
- it must agree with all that the Church holds to be true
- it must be explained according to principles held by the Church as binding in faith
- it may serve to strengthen the certainty of the truths of the Catholic faith, but not confuse or make this faith less certain
- it should help the faithful profess their faith by sharing it with others more effectively
- it should enable Catholics to defend their faith more courageously, because they understand what they believe more deeply
- it should finally assist believers to live their faith by imitating the virtues that God became man to teach us how to practice.

## PART TWO

### THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

At this point in our study of the Bible, we turn from the Scriptures as a whole to look briefly at the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments.

Our purpose here is to provide some framework for what follows, namely a study of the master themes of the Bible.

The very word “book,” as applied to the Bible, has a variety of meanings. Sometimes the Bible as a whole is simply called “The Book.” Then within the Bible we speak of “books,” even though some of them are very short, like Obadiah in the Old Testament which is only one chapter long, or the Second letter of John, which is even shorter.

The word “Bible” itself is derived from the Greek *Biblia* which is the plural of *Biblion*, a book or, originally, papyrus on which the ancients wrote their manuscripts.

Depending on how they are identified, there are forty-five books in the original Vulgate edition of the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New.

Although, as we have seen, the Catholic Church had from the earliest times determined which books belong to the Bible. It was not until the Council of Trent that a formal definition was made. Because of its importance, it is worth questioning the Church’s official teaching in full.

First the council declares that there are two sources of divine revelation, Sacred Scripture *and* Sacred Tradition.

The council follows the example of the orthodox Fathers, and with the same sense of devotion and reverence with which it accepts and venerates all the books, both of the Old and the New Testament. Since one God is the author of both, it also accepts and venerates traditions concerned with faith and morals as having been received orally from Christ or inspired by the Holy Spirit and continuously preserved in the Catholic Church. It judged,

however, that a list of the Sacred Books should be written into this decree so that no one may doubt which books the council accepts. The list is here given.

Then are enumerated the books of the Old Testament. The Book of Lamentations is not listed, because it is considered part of Jeremiah. Also there are four books of Kings, which are now classified as two books of Samuel followed by two books of Kings, which corresponds to the original Hebrew terminology. Moreover, what we now call the two books of Chronicles, Trent calls the books of Paralipomenon, which literally means “things left out or omitted,” because they are a kind of supplement to the books of Kings. The Hebrews call them *Dibre Haijamin*, which means “The words of the days,” or more commonly, “The Chronicles.”

In the words of the Council of Trent, therefore:

The Old Testament: five books of Moses, that is, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; Joshua, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, two of Paralipomenon; the first book of Esdras and the second, which is called Nehemias; Tobias, Judith, Esther, Job, David’s Psalter of one hundred and fifty psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Canticle of Canticles, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Isaias, Jeremias with Baruch, Ezechiel, Daniel; the twelve minor prophets, that is Osee, Joel, Amos, Abdias, Jonas, Micheas, Nahum, Habacuc, Sophonias, Aggaeus, Zacharias, Malachias; two books of Machabees, the first and the second.

The New Testament books defined by Trent are twenty-seven in number. Noteworthy are several facts: that the Acts of the Apostles is said to have been authored by St. Luke; that St. Paul is said to have written Hebrews and that St. John wrote the Apocalypse. The sequence is the same as found in the most ancient manuscripts of the Bible.

The New Testament: the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles, written by the Evangelist Luke; fourteen epistles of the Apostle Paul: to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians, to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, two to Timothy, to Titus, to Philemon, to the Hebrews; two epistles of the Apostle Peter, three of the Apostle John, one of the Apostle James, one of the Apostle Jude; and the Apocalypse of the Apostle John.

The closing declaration of Trent condemns anyone who denies the foregoing canon of Sacred Scripture.

Moreover, if anyone does not accept these books as sacred and canonical in their entirety, with all their parts, according to the text commonly read in the Catholic Church and as they are in the ancient Latin Vulgate, but knowingly and willfully contemns the traditions previously mentioned: let him be anathema (*Denzinger* 1501-1504).

The first and second Vatican Councils confirmed this teaching of Trent, and simply accepted the canon of Scripture as defined by the Church in 1546 which, incidentally, was the year of Martin Luther's death.

## Chapter VI

### THE OLD TESTAMENT

We have already seen that what the Catholic Church calls the Old Testament contains more books than are recognized either among the Jews or the Protestants. The Catholic Church believes, and has so defined, that there are forty-five inspired books in the Old Covenant.

Different scholars classify these books in different ways. In general, however, the classification is either chronological or logical; that is, following the sequence of their original writing, or according to the character of the contents of the inspired writings. Our doctrinal analysis will be according to logical categories, namely the Pentateuch, Historical Books, Wisdom Books, and the Prophets.

There is some value, however, in at least briefly looking at the time order in which the books were composed. One accepted order classifies their composition as follows:

1. During the period from the beginning of the history of the Jewish people to the close of Mosaic legislation and the entrance of the Israelites into Palestine, about 1400 B.C., we have

- The origin of the Pentateuch, namely Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

2. From the time the Jews entered the Promised Land to their separation into the two kingdoms of Judah and Samaria, about 920 B.C., sacred poetry especially flourished. Thus we have

- Joshua

- Judges

- Ruth

- Samuel

- Psalms

- Job

- Song of Songs

- Proverbs and

- Ecclesiastes

3. From the separation of the two kingdoms to the end of the Babylonian captivity, commonly dated 536 B.C., inspired prophecy flourished in Israel. During this time the works of the four major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel) and most of the minor prophets wrote their books.

4. The final period of Old Testament writing extended from the end of the Captivity to the coming of Christ. During this time we have the Books of

- Kings
- Chronicles
- Ezra and Nehemiah
- Esther
- Tobit
- Judith
- Maccabees
- Haggai (Aggaeus)
- Zechariah and Malachi
- Sirach or Ecclesiasticus and
- Wisdom

We can draw an important conclusion from the historical sequence of the Old Testament. It shows that the Bible began with the origin of the Chosen People, and that God's revelation was only gradual. It spanned about two thousand years, from the twentieth to the first century before Christ. As a result, we find a remarkable development in biblical Old Testament revelation. Relatively obscure truths become more clear, general injunctions become more specific, predictions of the Messiah become more detailed. All of this is part of God's providential plan to prepare His People for the coming of the Savior.

This fact of progress in Old Testament revelation with new and distinct truths added to previous ones, tells us many things. Not the least of these is the need of seeing the Old Covenant as a whole, and not depending on any single book as definitive on some doctrine of faith or morals. One passage will shed light on another; one book will add to the preceding. In practice, this calls for a wider and deeper understanding of Old Testament Scriptures than most people, even well educated Catholics, commonly have.

Immediately, however, this kind of development of revelation must be

distinguished from development of doctrine. Dogmatic or doctrinal progress presumes that something has already been revealed. Then the Church, through prayer and reflection, authoritatively makes explicit what may have been revealed only implicitly; or she makes clear what was only obscurely revealed. But the Church adds no new revealed truths to the deposit of faith. Development of revelation on the other hand, literally means adding new elements to God's revealed truth.

No doubt the greatest progress in new biblical revelation came with the coming of Christ. In this sense, the New Testament is "new" as compared with the Old beyond anything found in the Scriptures before the Incarnation. But the Old Testament, too, reveals a steady progress from Genesis through to the last inspired book of the Torah.

## Chapter VII

### THE NEW TESTAMENT

The books of the New Testament are commonly divided into three groups: historical, didactic or instructional, and prophetic. The historical group covers the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles; the didactic are the Epistles written by the Apostles; and there is only one prophetic book, the Apocalypse of St. John.

#### THE GOSPELS

Christians gave the name *Evangelion* (Good Tidings) to the account of life everlasting lost through Adam and restored by Christ. The Gospel is, therefore, the news of the Redemption and the Redeemer, which the Apostles were commissioned by Christ to proclaim to the whole world.

Since all of Christ's teaching was oral, the word "Gospel" originally meant oral instruction. Since the Apostles were agreed on what the message of Christ contains, people at first knew of only one Gospel. When some of the apostolic preaching came to be written down, the faithful began to speak of "Gospels." Yet all the while it was assumed there was only one Gospel that underlies all the inspired expressions of the one message. Among the four written versions, the first three closely resemble one another, while the fourth complements them.

Moreover, like the written Gospels, the other books of the New Testament are also based on an established oral tradition of Christ's teaching about human salvation.

The familiar arrangement of the Gospels, with Matthew always first, then Mark and Luke, and finally John, is formed in all the ancient translations and in every list of the canonical Scriptures. It was assumed that Matthew's Gospel was written first and John's last.

The accounts of the four evangelists can be harmonized to give a lifelike biography of the Savior. One recommended method is to use the fourth Gospel as the basis, along with the four Paschal festivals during Christ's public life, namely John 2:13, 5:1, 6:4 and 11:55. Then fit into this framework first St. Luke's narrative, because

he follows a chronological order, and then the narratives of Matthew and Mark. It should be added, however, that Matthew often departs from the chronological order.

**St. Matthew** had a particular aim in view. His Gospel was written to give the Jews and Jewish converts conclusive proof that Jesus was indeed the Messiah foretold by the prophets. As a result, Matthew has many references to the Old Testament, showing how the prophecies and prefigures of the Messiah were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. To sustain this purpose, the evangelist more than once sacrifices the chronological sequence. He says very little about Christ's work in Judea, where the presence of the Sanhedrin prevented the Savior from being welcomed, and where He found few disciples.

In contrast, however, Matthew gives a full account of Christ's successful ministry in Galilee, as had been foretold by Isaiah (Chapter 9). This was a rebuke to the capitol and the Temple, and especially to the Jewish priesthood, which expected not a poor and humble Messiah, but a rich and powerful political leader who would restore the throne of David in Jerusalem.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus showed the unbelief of these men and therefore withdrew almost entirely from the capitol. He went there only to die on the throne of the Cross. Not surprisingly, most of Christ's followers were from Galilee. The evangelist did the same as his Master. He seems to have preached mainly in Galilee and wrote his Gospel first for the Galileans.

Historical evidence indicates that Matthew wrote his Gospel originally in Chaldaic or Aramaic dialect, which is called Hebrew in the New Testament. In fact, an Aramaic text was necessary when the Gospel had to be read in public.

The Hebrew original text has perished and the Church recognizes only the Greek text of St. Matthew. No certain answer can be given as to who made the translation. A famous passage in the writings of St. Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis (60-130 A.D.) states that "Matthew wrote the divine oracles in the Hebrew language, which every reader interpreted as best he could" (*Enchiridion Patristicum*, 95). St. Papias was a disciple of St. John the Apostle.

**St. Mark** expresses the purpose he had in the opening of his Gospel, "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk 1:1). And

he immediately adds the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah to show that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Law.

Our most ancient historical testimony is again from St. Papias who said this about Mark:

Mark, who was interpreter to Peter, wrote down very accurately what he stated regarding the words and deeds of Christ. But he did not write them in chronological order, because he had neither heard the Lord nor followed Him. He paid particular attention to one point, that is, to omit nothing of what he had heard, nor to add any falsehood to them (*Enchiridion Patristicum*, 95).

The Church's tradition associates the second Gospel with the city of Rome. We may, therefore, surmise that Mark wrote his Gospel at the request of the faithful who wished to possess in writing what St. Peter had preached. Evidence of its composition outside of Palestine is the fact that Hebrew words are explained by giving their Greek equivalents. Also, comments are made about Jewish customs (for example 5:41, 7:3, 14:12, 15:22, 34, 42) for the benefit of people unfamiliar with Judaism.

There are indications that St. Peter had a hand in writing this Gospel. Thus the events are related as by an eyewitness. There are more references to Peter than in any other Gospel. Though other events are given only briefly, Peter's denial of his Master is narrated in great detail, while passing over Peter's special commission from Christ.

The second Gospel is the shortest of the four, yet resembling Luke to some extent, but mainly Matthew, where we find at times a word for word similarity. Volumes have been written on what is called the Synoptic Problem. The traditional explanation is to say that Mark used Matthew's original Hebrew Gospel. Some would even suggest that Mark translated Matthew into Greek. St. Luke, then, might have used both Gospels when he wrote his own.

The most striking feature of Mark may be summarized in the word "Savior." Christ appears throughout this short Gospel as possessing divine power, especially in working miracles. There are no less than twenty specific miracles and allusion to others. In fact, Christ's fame spreads so quickly that shortly after beginning His

ministry, multitudes flock to Him even from relatively distant places. Most of these miracles are of healing or of Christ's power over the forces of nature.

The most controverted aspect of St. Mark's Gospel is the concluding twelve verses (16:9-20). They describe Christ's Resurrection and appearances and His Ascension into heaven. These verses are missing from two important Greek manuscripts and some of the Fathers of the Church noted that this ending is absent from other ancient manuscripts as well.

On the other hand, the verses are present in most of the old manuscripts and St. Irenaeus (140-202 A.D.) not only quotes from the longer ending, but identifies it with St. Mark. The Catholic Church simply accepts these verses as inspired and therefore belonging to the second Gospel. Moreover, the traditional position is that Mark is their author. What is most significant about this longer conclusion is that it contains Christ's promise of the power of working miracles to those who believe. No less significant is that in Mark's ending, the Savior not only commissions the Apostles to proclaim the Gospel, but He adds a promise and a warning: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:16).

**St. Luke** wrote his Gospel, as he explains, in order to supplement the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. We know, besides, there were other narratives of the life and teaching of Christ; but because they lacked apostolic approval and authority, they have perished.

Christian antiquity has always ascribed the third Gospel to St. Luke, a disciple and companion to St. Paul, and often mentioned in the Pauline epistles. We gather some facts about his life from the Acts of the Apostles.

No doubt, St. Luke derived much information from St. Paul. However, as he says in the introduction, he also used other authorities. He mentions "those who from the outset were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Lk 1:2). They would be the disciples of the Master. There is, moreover, good evidence that he knew Mary, the Mother of Jesus. In fact, St. Luke explicitly says that Mary kept in her heart all the words and events connected with the childhood of her Son.

So distinctive is St. Luke's account of the life of Christ that it has been given various names. It is called the Gospel of St. Paul, because the author was the

intimate companion of the Apostle to the Gentiles; also the Gospel of Mercy because it features the Savior's extraordinary love for repentant sinners; also the Gospel of Mary because most of what we know about the Blessed Virgin is found in the third Gospel; also the Gospel of Prayer because of its frequent mention of Christ praying, of the necessity for prayer and because, besides the *Pater noster*, this Gospel records the *Benedictus*, the *Magnificat* and the *Gloria in excelsis*; also the Gospel of the Gentiles, because it shows Jesus Christ as the Savior of all mankind; also the Gospel of Joy because the evangelist stresses the peace and joy that following Christ and doing His will produce in the believers. Finally this is called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit because the third Person of the Trinity is so prominent, from the Annunciation of Our Lady, through Christ's public life, and in the closing verses Luke records the Savior's parting words to the disciples, "I am sending down to you what the Father has promised. Stay in the city, then, until you are clothed with the power from on high" (Lk 24:49). The power that Christ promised was the Holy Spirit, whose coming is later recalled by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles.

**St. John's Gospel** is unique. Not only does it contain many events and discourses not present in the Synoptics, but its whole approach to Christ is decisively different.

John the Evangelist was certainly familiar with the first three Gospels. And thus one of his motives for adding his own account of Christ's life was to supplement what the others had written. But, on his own testimony, the main reason was to show that Christ was, indeed, the natural Son of God, who proved His claim to oneness with the Father by working outstanding miracles, including the raising of Lazarus from the grave. Only John records this event.

Early Christian writers like Sts. Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria testify that many bishops and Christian communities begged John to write another Gospel. They urged him to bring out the fact of Christ's Divinity and leave a record of his own spiritual understanding of the Savior.

In keeping with this purpose, the fourth Gospel gives us the longest extant discourses of Jesus about His relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit. It makes clear who is the heart of the Christian religion, namely that Jesus is true God in human flesh, and that the most fundamental truth of Christianity is faith in Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of the eternal Father.

We know from history that Christ's Divinity was being challenged by some who still called themselves Christians. Not surprisingly, therefore, John's first conclusion of the Gospel declares, "There were many other signs that Jesus worked and the disciples saw, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through His name" (Jn 20:30-31).

Always to be kept in mind is the fact that, by the time John wrote his Gospel, the Church had spread far and wide. Historians tell us that by the end of the first century, there were no less than one hundred dioceses, with bishops at their head, throughout the Mediterranean world. Moreover, John himself had experienced the influence of the Spirit of Christ at work in the Church, and in his own mind and heart. All of these would give him a depth of understanding of the Savior and a penetration into the mysteries He revealed that only "the beloved disciple" could provide.

One feature of John's Gospel that deserves at least brief attention is its double ending, with Chapter 20, and again with Chapter 21. The centerpiece of the second ending is Christ's conferral of the primacy on Peter, as He had promised to do in the Gospel of Matthew (16:13-20). We know that already in the first century, Peter and his successors exercised their authority over the churches established by the Apostles. John's account of Peter's receiving authority to "feed" the faithful with revealed truth and to "look after" the sheep of Christ's flock, firmly established the supreme jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome. Thus the right of the Popes to teach and govern the universal Church is an article of faith based on the revealed word of God, as recorded in the final chapter of the fourth Gospel.

## **ACTS OF THE APOSTLES**

Although the author of the Acts of the Apostles does not identify himself by name, tradition has consistently held it was St. Luke, the disciple of St. Paul. This is so true that the Acts could well be considered Luke's second Gospel.

There are three distinguishing parts in the Acts. The first part (Chapters 1-7) deals with the early history of the Church, beginning with Christ's Ascension and Pentecost, and going on to her propagation among the Jews. Most of the events

here described took place in Jerusalem. The second part (Chapters 8-12) treats of the Church's extension beyond the Jews to the Gentiles. The center of gravity also shifts from Jerusalem to Antioch. But in both these sections, St. Peter is the principal figure. The third part, which is also the longest (Chapters 13-28) explains in detail how the Church spread among the Gentiles. St. Paul also becomes the chief personage and the center of activity becomes Rome.

One feature that stands out in the Acts is the dominant position of Peter in the apostolic Church. He directed the choice of Matthias to replace the traitor Judas. He preached the first sermon on Pentecost Sunday. He performed the first miracle by healing the man born lame. He rebuked Ananias and Sapphira for their dishonesty, and it was in his presence that they were struck dead. Peter spoke up to the Sanhedrin in defense of the Apostles' preaching. Peter was the one who reprimanded Simon the magician. Peter decided that the Gentiles should be baptized and accepted into the fold without being bound by the Jewish dietary laws and circumcision.

The Acts of the Apostles also provides a historical framework for the preaching and activities of St. Paul. His faithful disciple, Luke, tells us about Paul's journey to Cyprus and Asia Minor, his second missionary journey, his activity in Asia Minor and Macedonia, his visit to Athens and Corinth, his third missionary journey and stay in Ephesus, then his journey to Jerusalem and imprisonment in Caesarea, then his journey to Rome, shipwreck at Malta, and finally his arrival in Rome.

Paul's speech to the Roman Jews closes the Acts. He quotes Isaiah, saying, "You will hear and hear again but not understand, see and see again but not perceive" (Is 6:9-10), and concludes with this announcement, "Understand, then, that this salvation of God has been sent to the pagans; they will listen to it" (Acts 28:26, 28).

## **LETTERS OF ST. PAUL**

St. Paul, known as Saul before his conversion, was of Jewish ancestry of the tribe of Benjamin. He was born in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia. As he testified at a meeting of the Sanhedrin, "I am a Pharisee and the son of Pharisees" (Acts 23:6). This meant that his parents brought him up according to the strictest orthodox principles.

He had early learned the art of weaving tent covers, by which he mainly supported himself even after his conversion. Rather exceptionally, he enjoyed Roman citizenship from birth and went to Jerusalem to complete his education, where his teacher was the renowned Gamaliel. Also judging by his several references to non-Christian writers, he must have been familiar with western literature (Acts 17:28, Titus 1:12, I Cor 15:33).

As an enthusiastic zealot for the Jewish law, he participated in the stoning of St. Stephen, at least by his approval. Not unlikely he was the one who gave Luke such a full account of Stephen's martyrdom. The Fathers of the Church say that it was St. Stephen who, by his death, obtained for Saul the grace of conversion.

Saul was converted not far from Damascus where he heard Christ asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me" (Acts 9:4). He was baptized at Damascus and immediately began to proclaim Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and the Son of God. For a time, he withdrew into Arabia to pray and do penance. He returned to Damascus and then proceeded to travel on a scale that defies human explanation, proclaiming the Gospel and helping the Apostles establish churches throughout the Mediterranean world.

The letters of St. Paul were an integral part of his missionary zeal. The faithful read these letters at public worship of the Christian communities, and collections of them were made at an early date. The first evidence of such a collection is the statement of Peter, when he told the people, "Think of Our Lord's patience as your opportunity to be saved; our brother Paul, who is so dear to us, told you this when he wrote to you with the wisdom that is his special gift" (II Peter 3:15).

Most of the Fathers of the Church held that St. Paul wrote thirteen letters, since they ascribed Hebrews to another author. The Council of Trent, as we saw, attributes the letter to the Hebrews as also of Pauline origin.

Different scholars assign different sequences to the composition of the epistles. One sequence places the two letters to the Thessalonians and the letter to the Galatians during Paul's first residence in Corinth. They therefore would belong to his first missionary journey. The first epistle to the Corinthians is said to have been written at Ephesus on his third journey and second Corinthians from Macedonia. The letter to the Romans is believed to have been composed during

Paul's second visit to Corinth.

During his first imprisonment in Rome, he wrote four letters, namely, to the Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon. The epistle to the Hebrews was written in Italy after St. Paul was released from prison. It is generally held that the first letter to Timothy and the one to Titus were written when the Apostle was on his fourth journey to the East. And finally, the second letter to Timothy was drafted during his second imprisonment in Rome, shortly before his martyrdom.

The sequence of Paul's letter in the canon of the New Testament is, therefore, not chronological. It is rather in the order of importance of the churches to which Paul was writing.

The letter to the Romans has two parts. The first is chiefly doctrinal (1-11), the second is more ethical (12-16). St. Paul speaks of the universal sinfulness of mankind, and therefore everyone needs redemption. The way to salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. In the moral section of the letter, Paul speaks of the fruits that the faithful should bring forth in their lives. They should be humble and loving, even to their enemies, and they are to obey the civil government in its just legislation; they are to act with consideration towards the weak and imperfect and preserve harmony by submitting to one another.

The first letter to the Corinthians is in response to complaints about the conduct of the faithful in Corinth. St. Paul condemns the party spirit that had developed. He says the incestuous man should be expelled; he reprimands those who go to court before pagan tribunals and denounces the disgrace of immorality. He answers a series of questions addressed to him: on marriage and virginity, on eating food offered to idols, on participating in pagan festivals, on the role of women in church, the celebration of the Eucharist, the charismatic gifts and the superiority of charity, and finally he speaks about the resurrection of the body. There is a concluding request of money for the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is deeply personal. He urges harmony among the faithful, respects the request for financial aid to Jewish Christians, argues against the Judaizing converts, defends his own person and teaching and announces his own coming to Corinth.

In the letter to the Galatians, St. Paul defends his apostleship and doctrine as of

divine origin, and declares that adding to the Gospel is unnecessary and, in fact, contrary to the faith.

The epistle to the Ephesians states how great should be the happiness of the Gentiles who now belong to the Church. He declares that he has been divinely commissioned to preach the universality of the Gospel of salvation. He again stresses the importance of harmony among the faithful, as proof to unbelievers that the followers of Christ are united in charity. He concludes with admonitions to Christian families.

The letter to the Ephesians is an expression of thanks for their loyalty to Christ, for helping Paul while he was in prison. It is also a warning to the faithful to beware of Judaizing teachers.

In the letter to the Colossians, the first two chapters are filled with instructions, the last two are admonitions. St. Paul declares that Christianity far surpasses the wisdom of the Jews and Greeks, the adoration of angels and perverse mortification are wrong. The people are to sanctify themselves by purity of life and the following of Christ.

St. Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians tells the faithful that God will reward their zeal for the faith, but they are not to expect an early coming of Christ. Only after the man of sin (or antichrist) takes over the government of the world, will Christ's second coming occur. The people are warned against idleness and he urges everyone to support himself by his own work. But the really poor should be helped by the followers of Christ.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul repeats the fundamental principle of faith, that Christ came to save sinners. He explains that to promote the Gospel, both preaching and prayer are necessary. Right men should be chosen for the clergy. Timothy must oppose the teachers of so-called wisdom, must insist and guide the faithful, and especially the priests. Moreover, he is to labor selflessly, by giving a good example to those under his care.

In the second letter to Timothy, the Apostle reminds him of his consecration and the duty as shepherd of the flock. Timothy is told to train others as teachers, not dispute with heretics, win over the wavering by the practice of meekness and patience, prepare for suffering and hold fast to Tradition and Sacred Scripture.

Writing to Philemon, the Apostle asks him to receive the runaway slave, Onesimus, with Christian charity. At the same time, the converted Onesimus receives from Paul a letter recommending him to his master.

The letter to the Hebrews is a studied defense of the advantages of Christianity over Judaism. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all the Hebrew prophecies; the covenant established by Him is far superior to that of Moses, because Christ is the Son and not only the servant of God. Christ is the true priest, appointed by God. The sacrifice of Christ far surpasses the sacrifices offered in earthly sanctuaries. The faithful are exhorted to perseverance, especially in the faith, as did the great patriarchs of old. The letter closes with a plea for harmony and growth in Christian sanctity.

## **THE CATHOLIC EPISTLES**

The seven letters of the New Testament by the Apostles Peter, James, John and Jude have been known from the earliest times as the Catholic Epistles. The best explanation of why they are called “Catholic” is the one given by Lusebius of Caesarea (265-340 A.D.). They are Catholic because they have been “recognized by the universal Church” (*History of the Church*, III, 3). Their sequence in the Bible is the one found in most of the early manuscripts.

**James**, the younger or Less, son of Alpheus, Bishop of Jerusalem and near relative of Christ wrote the epistle that now carries his name. He addressed the letter, as Bishop of Jerusalem, to the Jewish converts to Christianity, who were scattered abroad. The letter was intended to clear up misunderstanding of Christian freedom, as though faith in Christ was enough for salvation. Not so. The true follower of Christ believes, indeed, but he puts his faith into practice by a holy life, notably in the patient acceptance of the trials of life and active love of others. Especially to be avoided are sins of the tongue.

**St. Peter** wrote two letters. The first was probably written when persecution of the Church was still in prospect. So Christians were encouraged to remain firm in the faith and virtue. It was specially necessary for those who called themselves Christians to practice above ordinary virtue if the pagans are to be won to the true faith. Obedience to lawful authority was necessary, “God wants you to be good

citizens” (I Peter 2:15). The faithful must beware of pagan vices, be filled with brotherly love and the rulers in the Church should be an example to all. The letter closes with an exhortation to resist the devil who “is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour” (I Peter 5:8).

Peter’s second letter is directed against certain false teachers. Misrepresenting Christian liberty, they claim that carnal desires are morally indifferent. “God punishes those who are governed by the corrupt bodily desires and have no respect for authority” (II Peter 2:10).

The three letters of **John** are of unequal length. The first is the longest and most doctrinal. There is a constant struggle between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. Jesus Christ came into the world to enlighten mankind. We must, therefore, believe in Him and through Him become children of God. We show our love for Him mainly by our love for others.

John’s second letter was written to a certain Cyria, which may have been the name of a local Church. His third letter was sent to a person named Caius, who may have presided over the Christian community at Cyria. In both letters, the Apostle expresses his deep appreciation of the zeal of the faithful to whom he is writing. But the main thrust in the two epistles is a warning against the enemies of Christ; against those who deny Christ’s divinity and against a certain Diotrephes who has been circulating malicious lies about St. John.

The epistle of **St. Jude** is one chapter large and concerns itself mainly with admonitions about certain false teachers. Under the guise of freedom, they were promoting all kinds of sensuality, especially sins of fornication and sodomy. “These people,” says Jude, “abuse anything they do not understand” (Jude 10).

## **THE APOCALYPSE**

This book of revelation (*apokalupsis* = disclosure) gives us a prophetic insight regarding the future of the Church on earth, the struggles for and against Christ to the end of the world, the first victory of the faithful, and the glories of heaven in the world to come.

There are four principal parts to the Apocalypse. In the first, John receives

communications and admonitions from Christ about seven churches in the province of Asia (Chapters 1-3). In the second part, John is caught up to heaven and sees God on a throne, holding a book in His hand with seven seals, which symbolizes the future. As one seal after another is broken, a judgment comes on mankind to the purpose of sanctifying the faithful. Before the seventh seal is opened, St. John has three visions, in the last of which Christ and His followers are victorious over their enemies.

The third part represents the enemies of Christ as a dragon, a beast with seven heads and ten horns, and a beast with two horns. A common interpretation identifies these symbols as the devil, the powers of the world and false prophets, all opposed to Christ and His Church. The struggle of Christ with His enemies ends in the victory of the Savior and His followers. In the final part of the Apocalypse, the dragon is let loose once again and tries to stir up the nations against the saints of God, but he is overthrown and cast into a pool of fire. St. John then sees after the last day a new heaven and a new earth, preceded by the resurrection. In his closing vision, John describes the New Jerusalem, which is the Church of Christ in glory.

## PART THREE

### MASTER THEMES OF THE BIBLE

As we approach the master themes of the Bible, we should immediately recognize that the two Testaments of Sacred Scripture are not only the Old and the New chronologically. They also differ theologically. Certainly there is an essential unity between them, since it is one and the same Spirit who inspired Genesis and the Apocalypse, and all the books in between. But what a difference between God revealing Himself through human beings and speaking to us in person. St. Paul could not be clearer in making this distinction.

At various times in the past and in various ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, He has spoken to us through His Son, the Son that He has appointed to inherit everything, and through whom He made everything there is (Heb. 1:1-2).

In our reflections on the master themes of the Bible, therefore, we will always distinguish what the Old Testament and then what the New Testament says about each successive theme. But the New Testament is *new*. It develops and amplifies, it confirms and clarifies, it enlarges and specifies what the Old Testament reveals about God and about man's responsibilities to God.

This is not unimportant for many reasons, but for one reason above all. The New Testament goes far beyond the Old in its doctrine of faith and morals. Christians are expected to believe in mysteries that were not revealed until Christ came into the world; and they are required to practice virtue that was not demanded even of the patriarchs of old.

## Chapter VIII

### OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Fundamental to everything that the Bible teaches is the conviction that we can know God, know Him in this life and know Him in the life to come. In fact, without knowing God with our minds, we could not love Him with our wills and, therefore, serve Him with our whole being.

#### NATURAL KNOWLEDGE

Given the widespread agnosticism and even atheism in our day, there is some value in seeing what the Scriptures teach about our ability to know God apart from supernatural revelation. It is a defined article of the Catholic faith, which denies “that the one true God, our Creator and Lord, cannot be known with certainty in the light of human reason, by those things which have been made” (I Vatican Council, Denzinger 3026). In the Old Testament, some of the books were written outside of Palestine among the Jews of the Diaspora. Among these is the book of Wisdom. Being in regular contact with non-Jewish Hellenists, the dispersed Israelites had to cope with Greek philosophy and defend their faith before the bar of reason, far more than their coreligionists in Judea or Galilee.

In context, the inspired writer is telling his own people that pagans among whom they live are guilty of not worshipping the one true God.

For all men were by nature foolish who were in ignorance of God, and who from the good things seen did not succeed in knowing Him who is, and from studying the works did not discern the artisan; but either fire, or wind, or the swift air, or the circuit of the stars, or the mighty water, or the luminaries of heaven, the governors of the world, they considered gods. Now if out of joy in their beauty they thought them gods, let them know how far more excellent is the Lord than these; for the original source of beauty fashioned them. Or if they were struck by their might and energy, let them from these things realize how much more powerful is He who made them. For from the greatness and the beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen (Wisdom 13:1-5).

The author of Wisdom does not explain why the pagans failed to recognize the true God, but worshipped idols instead. But historically, we know that idolatry is mainly the result of immorality. People create gods to their own image and likeness, to justify their misconduct and to rationalize their pride.

Centuries later, St. Paul wrote to the faithful in Rome and returned to the same theme. He had to warn the Christians not to be taken in by the idolatry all around them. But Paul goes far beyond Wisdom in assigning a moral cause for idol worship and describing the consequences as a punishment from God.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those men who in wickedness hold back the truth of God, seeing that what may be known about God is manifest to them. For God has manifested it to them. For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes are clearly seen—His everlasting power also and divinity—being understood through the things that are made. And so they are without excuse, seeing that, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks, but became vain in their reasonings, and their senseless minds have been darkened....

For this cause God has given them up to shameful lusts; for their women have exchanged the natural use for that which is against nature, and in like manner the men also, having abandoned the natural use of the woman, have burned in their lusts towards another, men with men doing shameless things and receiving in themselves the fitting recompense of their perversity. And as they have resolved against possessing the knowledge of God, God has given them up to a reprobate sense, so that they do what is not fitting... (Rom. 1:18-21, 26-28).

The implications of this teaching of St. Paul for our day are sobering in the extreme. The Romans of the modern world who revel in their unnatural lusts are only reaping the natural fruits of their disregard of God. God cannot be ignored with impunity. Intellectual pride that rejects God makes a person the slave of his passions.

## **REVEALED KNOWLEDGE**

The first article of the Apostles' Creed declares, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty." The same affirmation is repeated in every Creed of Christendom. We are, in other words, not only to know God by the light of reason, but also believe in Him on faith.

This is not a theological subtlety. It is, in fact, the primary condition for salvation. "Without faith," St. Paul teaches, "it is impossible to please God, since anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and rewards those who seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

What is the supernatural knowledge of God? It is the knowledge which results from the acceptance of divine revelation. Such revealed knowledge confirms what we know about God from reason, and enables the existence of God to be known easily by everyone, with certainty and without error.

But revealed knowledge does still more. It tells us, that God is, indeed, Creator of heaven and earth, but He is also the eternal Community of Persons who constitute the Holy Trinity.

Moreover, the supernatural knowledge of God that we now have on faith is destined to become the direct seeing of God in the beatific vision. "Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror, but then we shall be seeing face to face. The knowledge that I have now is imperfect, but then I shall know as fully as I am known" (I Cor. 13:12).

Note the divine logic of salvation. Humble faith in God in this life, put into faithful practice of virtue, merits the intuitive vision of God in the life to come. This was concisely expressed by the Savior in His priestly prayer at the Last Supper. "Eternal life is this," He said, "to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3).

What does this mean? It means that the most fundamental duty we have is to submit our minds in faith, by acknowledging and adoring the one true God; and accepting, also on faith, that Christ is the natural Son of God who came into the world to redeem the world by His death on the Cross.

This deserves to be clearly understood. No doubt, we are to practice all the virtues,

theological and moral, if we wish to be saved. But the basic virtue which underlies all the rest is faith. It is by faith that we bend our proud intellects to believe in God's existence, in His providence and, above all, in His boundless love which became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ.

## Chapter IX

### OUR LOVE OF GOD

The purpose of knowing God is to love Him. And the better we know Him, the more we can love Him, because love depends absolutely on knowledge. We cannot love the unknown.

As we approach this fundamental mandate of Sacred Scripture, our duty to love God, we must immediately point out the world of difference between the two Testaments. The difference lies mainly in fact of the Incarnation. Once God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, every aspect of our love of God acquired a depth of meaning and a capacity for self-sacrifice that was simply unknown in pre-Christian history.

#### OLD TESTAMENT

The Torah more than once enjoins the Israelites to love Yahweh. But the classic passage has become the *Shema*, or prayer and profession of faith that every male Jew was expected to recite morning, noon and night.

Listen, Israel, Yahweh our God...  
...doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut. 6:4-9)

This passage contains the fundamental principle of the whole Mosaic Law. It is at once comparative and profoundly doctrinal. On its comparative side, the one God of Israel is contrasted with the many gods of the Gentiles; Jewish monotheism with pagan polytheism; and finally the true God of reality with the false deities of people's imagination.

The doctrine here stated declares "Yahweh our God is the one Yahweh," or in the Vulgate translation, "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." What the sacred writer is at pains to express here is that the God in whom Israel believes is not just another, even higher god alongside the divinities of paganism. The God of Israel alone has a right to be called God. He alone is Yahweh.

Yahweh is the name that God gave Himself when He spoke to Moses in the burning bush. He was instructed to lead the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt.

Then Moses said to God, “I am to go, then, to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ But if they ask me what His name is, what am I to tell them?” And God said to Moses, “I Am who I Am. This,” He added, “is what you must say to the sons of Israel: ‘I Am has sent me to you.’” And God also said to Moses, “You are to say to the sons of Israel: ‘Yahweh, the God of your fathers...has sent me to you’” (Ex. 3:13-25).

In giving Himself this name, Yahweh (I Am), God was identifying His very essence, which is Absolute Being. God is purely and simply Being. His essence is to exist. He alone is that Being who cannot not exist. He alone must be. He is Necessary Being, who is infinite in every perfection and eternal because, unlike the created world, He never had a beginning and will never have an end. All other beings are contingent, totally dependent beings. They depended on God to make them out of nothing, and depend on Him to sustain them in existence, and keep them from lapsing into nothingness from which they came.

It is this Yahweh whom Israel was commanded to love. Nor is it surprising that the faithful were told to love Him with all their heart, and soul and strength. Nothing less could be expected. The degree of our love of any being depends on the degree of its loveableness. God is infinitely loveable.

Why the sequence of “heart” and “soul” and “strength”? In order to make it as clear as possible that those who believe in God are to surrender their whole being to Yahweh. It was no coincidence that just before giving this injunction of selfless love of God, the author of Deuteronomy had narrated the Ten Commandments. Thus we are in effect told that Yahweh is truly loved when His commandments are obeyed.

## **NEW TESTAMENT**

All three synoptic writers relate the conversation between Christ and the lawyer who asked Him, “which is the great commandment in the law” (Mt), or “which

commandment is first of all” (Mk), or “what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Lk). In Matthew and Mark the Savior Himself quoted the *Shema* from Deuteronomy; in Luke the lawyer quoted and Christ approved his answer.

What is most remarkable, however, is that the New Testament version goes beyond the Old Law in two ways.

As recorded by Mark, Jesus says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mk 12:30). The first change, therefore, is the addition of the phrase “with all your mind.”

Christ goes on. Having declared that the love of God is “the great and first commandment,” He continues, “And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And He concluded, “On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22:37-40), and “there is no other commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:30-31).

What is the significance of Christ’s adding the injunction that we are to love God not only with all our heart and soul and strength, but also “with all our mind”? The significance lies in the fact that the only kind of love of God recognized in Scripture is the love shown in the practice of virtue. And with Christ’s coming, one virtue that became indispensable is the virtue of faith.

We believe with the intellect, assenting with our minds to God’s revelation. More than ever in the Old Law, the foundation of the New Law is acceptance by the mind of all the mysteries that Christ revealed, about Himself, about the Church He founded and about our heavenly destiny.

In other words, Christ is saying that love of God must include loving submission of mind to the infinite mind of God.

Christ’s second innovation, as we may call it, was to associate love of neighbor with the love of God. It is called the “second commandment,” which depends on the first as an effect depends on its cause. Only those who truly love God can truly love their neighbor. This is why any system of ethics that separates religion (man’s relationship with God) from morality (man’s relationship with others) is doomed to failure. There can be no realistic moral order which is not firmly

grounded in religion. As a person or a society becomes agnostic or atheistic, by ignoring or rejecting God, it becomes unjust and inhumanly cruel in its dealings with people. This is the basic reason why Communism, which is atheistic on principle, is demonically merciless in practice.

## **Chapter X**

### **MESSIANISM**

Unique among the religious traditions of the world, Christianity is the religion of hope. Its sacred writings from Genesis to the Book of Revelation are eschatological; they always press forward in expectation and recount the past as a presage of the future.

One of the benefits of a science like Comparative Religion is to discover this uniqueness, first among the ancient people of Israel and then among their inheritors, the followers of Jesus Christ.

Two different attitudes towards the Cosmos are implied in any valid comparison between man in a pagan society like Egypt and Babylonia and man in the Israel of the prophets. The former found himself indissolubly connected with the Cosmos and the cosmic rhythms, whereas the latter felt that he was only related to History. No doubt the Gentile had a history, too, but only to provide him with a multitude of gods and give him a pantheon of unhistorical beings and mythical heroes.

For the Gentile, “history” could be repeated indefinitely, in the sense that the myths served as models for worship which not only reenacted periodically the great events of the past; they were a constant reminder that what had taken place would re-occur, and that man was finally subject (as were also the gods) to an impersonal Force that inevitably governed the universe in predetermined cyclic repetition.

The forward thrust of Jewish eschatology had a general aspect that covers the gamut of Israel’s faith in Yahweh to lead His people through an earthly Promised Land to their final and beyond-this-earthly destiny. Its more particular form, called Messianism, is the historical background of the Christian religion and the foundation for any comprehensive understanding of Christology.

### **CONCEPT OF THE MESSIAH**

In Jewish tradition, the Messiah was the person, whether earthly or supernatural, who would be invested with special powers from on high and was destined to appear as the divinely appointed deliverer of his people.

Literally the Hebrew word *Messiah* means “Anointed,” and was used (in preference to other terms) to designate this Liberator. In the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament (completed before 100 B.C.), it is translated *Christos* (from *chrino* = I anoint). Hence the title “Christ,” given in the New Testament to Jesus of Nazareth as the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew of the prophets.

Christology, therefore, may rightly be called Messiology because it implies the belief that the Anointed One foretold in the Old Covenant has entered history; that the subject of the Gospel narratives fulfilled in His own person the expectations of Israel.

As normally conceived, the dominant figure of Israel’s hopes was the Messiah himself, and it is true that his personality is crucial to a valid interpretation of Jewish history. Yet the Messiah cannot be separated from the society he was expected to form or the new people he was going to lead.

This Messianic society would succeed the theocratic government of Israel and extend to all nations, races and classes of people. Membership in it carried the promise of order and peace in this world and of final beatitude in the next. Priests and teachers from all nations would serve the interests of Yahweh, dispensing an abundance of divine knowledge and a relish for things of the spirit; there would be one sacrifice, offering a clean oblation to the one true God throughout the world. Those who belonged were assured the remission of their sins and an outpouring of divine benediction.

What the prophets foretold in the Scriptures found reflection in the extra-canonical writings of the Hebrews, like the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, in a passage that was written two hundred years before the coming of Christ.

Then shall the Lord raise up a new priest.  
And he shall execute a righteous judgment upon the earth for a multitude of days.  
And his star shall rise in heaven as of a king.  
Lighting up the light of knowledge as the sun the day.

And he shall be magnified in the world.  
He shall shine forth as the sun of the earth,  
And he shall remove all darkness from under heaven,  
And there shall be peace in all the earth.  
And the knowledge of the Lord shall be poured forth upon the earth, as the  
water of the seas.  
And he shall give his majesty to his sons in truth for evermore.  
And there shall be none to succeed him for all generations for ever.  
And in his priesthood the Gentiles shall be multiplied in knowledge upon the  
earth,  
And enlightened through the grace of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

Some latter-day critics of Christianity would have us believe that Jewish Messianism came only as a natural reaction to centuries of oppression and after a millennium of suffering. But the history of Israel tells us a different story. Unlike their Gentile contemporaries, the Jews were not bounded by a cyclic determinism that saw no deliverance from the “law of eternal return.” Their Messianic aspirations went back to the beginnings of human history and continued with increasing depth throughout the whole span of God’s revelation to His chosen people.

Scholars have variously divided these Messianic predictions, but generally agree that three stages of development are easily defined: the patriarchal period that reaches back to the story of man’s creation and fall, up to the last of the great ancestors of Jesus before the Jewish monarchy; the Davidic stage from King David up to the Babylonian Captivity; and the age of the prophets, centering on the Exile and the new mood in Jewish thinking after the return to their native land.

## **MESSIANIC DEVELOPMENT**

It is not exactly true to say that the whole Bible, from the beginning, reflects a hope of future deliverance. The expectation is early, but yet only after an event took place that makes the Messianic prophecies meaningful. Not until man had sinned and become estranged from God does the concept of a liberator enter the stream of Jewish thought.

**Patriarchal Period.** After the sin of Adam and Eve, the tempter was sentenced by the Lord, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your descendents and her descendents. She shall crush your head, but you shall wound her heel.”<sup>2</sup> The context suggests that the woman is Eve, who had allowed herself to be seduced but in the future would resist the enemy. Her posterity would also withstand the tempter.

In cursing the serpent, God pointed to a deliverer, and in this sense the *Protoevangelium* (as the Fathers called it) of Genesis anticipates the great prophets who foretold the coming of the Savior. It was the first Gospel (god = good + spell = tidings). Out of his struggle with evil, man as deeply wounded, symbolized in the expression “you shall wound her heel.” But man will retain the friendship of God.

The call of Abraham to leave his home and go to a new land introduced another dimension to the history of Messianism. When men had abandoned God in spite of the deluge, the Lord first ordained that His name be known and honored by one family, and then by its descendents.

The Lord said to Abram: “Leave your land, your relatives, and your father’s home, for the land that I will show you; and I will make a great nation of you; I will bless you, and make your name so great that it will be used for blessings. I will bless those who bless you, and anyone who curses you, I will curse. Through you shall all the families of the earth invoke blessings on one another.”<sup>3</sup>

The relatives of Abraham were polytheists, given to worshipping the stars, and showed special devotion to the moon-god, Sin, who was highly honored in the regions of Ur and Haran. After this first vocation, Abraham’s monotheistic faith would be tried and purified, and passed on to his progeny.

This great promise was repeated, in more explicit terms. “Shall I hide,” the Lord asks, “what I am about to do from Abraham, seeing that Abraham is bound to become a great and powerful nation, and through him all the nations of the earth will invoke blessings on one another? No, I will make it known to him, in order that he may give instructions to his sons and his family after him to keep to the way of the Lord by doing what is good and right, so that the Lord may fulfill for

Abraham what He promised him.”<sup>4</sup>

Here the Messianic promise weaves into the ancient Covenant, where the anticipated blessings from on high are conditioned by a man’s fidelity to the Lord. At the same time, an appreciation is expected of Abraham’s children by their keeping alive the memory of divine goodness promised on condition of obedience to the divine will.

Abraham’s son Isaac hears the covenant confirmed, on the occasion of a famine in the land. He is warned by the Lord not to go down to Egypt, but rather “settle in the land that I shall designate to you. If you establish yourself as an immigrant in this land, I will be with you, and bless you. For to you and your descendents I am going to give this whole country, and so fulfill the oath which I made to your father Abraham.” Then the testament is repeated.

I will make your descendents as numerous as the stars in the sky, and I will give your descendents this whole country, so that all the nations of the earth will invoke blessings on one another through your descendents—just because Abraham heeded my instructions and kept my charge, my commands, statutes, and laws.<sup>5</sup>

Finally the patriarchal Messianism centers on Isaac’s son Jacob. He had reached a certain sanctuary on the way to Haran, where he spent the night. During sleep he had a dream in which he saw a ladder set up on the earth, with its top reaching the sky, and angels were ascending and descending on the ladder. Whereupon the Lord stood over him and advanced the Prophecy yet another step.

I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and of Isaac... Your descendents shall be like the dust on the ground. You shall spread to the west, to the east, to the north and to the south, so that all races of the earth will invoke blessings on one another through you and your descendents. I will be with you, and guard you wherever you go, and bring you back to this land. For I will never forsake you, until I have done what I promised you.<sup>6</sup>

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he exclaimed, “The Lord must surely be in this place,” and immediately made a vow to remain faithful to the One who appeared to him.

In the light of later developments, we may note that already in the patriarchal age, the promised Messianic blessings were intended not for the Jews alone but through them for all the nations of the world, symbolized by the four points of the compass.

**Royal Messianism.** The prediction of a royal Messiah begins with the dialogue between the prophet Nathan and King David. Not long before his adultery, David consulted the prophet about building a temple to the Lord. Yahweh rewarded this desire by promising rather to build for David a royal house that would endure forever. By implication, the force of this promise was to bind the family of David to the kingly state of the future Messiah.

The Lord declares to you that He will make you a house. And when your days are finished, and you are laid with your fathers, I will raise up your heir after you, who shall be born of your body. And I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish his kingdom forever... Your house and your kingdom shall be confirmed before me forever. Your throne shall be established forever.<sup>7</sup>

This solemn proclamation meant the regularization of the Covenant. From that time on, the Davidic line became a part to the Covenant. David and his descendents assumed responsibility for its maintenance and the duties it entailed. He was to concentrate in his person the whole people whose unity he safeguarded, and by behaving as a religious monarch would bring his nation the prosperity they desired.

From David onwards, the Messianic theme included the promise that the savior of his people should be born of this seed, thus further refining and focusing the centuries-old prophecies. If material things even before the time of Christ were signs of religious values, the Davidic lineage exemplified the principle. Grace took hold of the monarchy, raised its earthly status, and gave it a central part to play in carrying the Covenant into the New Testament.

As a result, the whole dynasty became conscious of its Messianic vocation. Every king of David's line knew that the day he was enthroned was also the day of his divine adoption. When a new reign began, the psalmists described their expectations of the monarchy, not only for the immediate present but for the distant future.

Perhaps the best known Messianic Psalm is the one cited by the Evangelist Matthew and the author of the letter to the Hebrews.

An oracle of the Lord to my lord: “Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool.” The scepter of your strength the Lord sends forth from Sion. Reign in the midst of your enemies. Your people will volunteer freely on your day of war. In holy array, from the womb of dawn, the dew of your youth is yours. The Lord has sworn and He will not retract: “You shall be a priest forever. A Melchizedek, because of me.”<sup>8</sup>

Centuries later, on a dramatic occasion when Jesus was being tested by the Pharisees, He asked them what they thought of the Messiah, whose son he was. They spontaneously told Him, “David’s.” Jesus silenced their denial of His transcendence by asking them again, quoting the above Psalm, “If David calls him (the Messiah) ‘Lord,’ how is he (only) his son?”

The Psalms, therefore, are a mosaic of witness to the Messianic anticipation. Whether sung for an investiture,<sup>9</sup> for a birthday,<sup>10</sup> at a marriage,<sup>11</sup> or as the cry of a desolate heart,<sup>12</sup> they become oracles of an earthly monarchy looking forward to the “Anointed One” whose royalty would surpass the dignity of all worldly kings.

**The Exile and After.** As Jewish history unrolled, it revealed the kings' inability to remain faithful to the trust placed in them. Israel's prophets boldly criticized the rulers who betrayed their lofty mission; but at the same time they upheld the hope that grew keener with every crisis and drew unwarranted comfort from the disappointments of experience.

Isaiah is the great Messianic prophet, whose predictions are imbedded in the Gospels and St. Paul, and whose foresight almost makes him a fifth evangelist.

Traditionally, the whole book was ascribed to Isaiah, the son of Amos, but critics are inclined to agree that everything after Chapter 36 as well as certain sections before (though canonical) were written by another hand. Since the Exile ended in 538 B.C. and Isaiah died about a hundred years before, it is important to establish the authorship by someone who experienced the Exile.

First Isaiah delivers a solemn oracle to the unworthy King Achaz who had wearied the Lord by his lack of faith: "Behold the *almah* shall conceive and shall bear a son, and she shall name him Emmanuel 'God with us'".<sup>13</sup> No doubt the Hebrew word *almah* could mean a girl of marriageable age, presumably unmarried. However, long before the time of Christ, the Greek Septuagint had translated *almah* as *he parthenos*, "the virgin." This remained the accepted tradition of the Jews until the dawn of Christianity. By the end of the first Christian century, the Jews eliminated all seven books of the Old Testament originally written in Greek. They also discarded the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, where *almah* is identified as "the virgin."

Later in the same reference to Emmanuel, Isaiah added a series of attributes to the ideal king that figure prominently in the Christmas liturgy.

For our sake a child is born, to our race a son is given, whose shoulder will bear the scepter of princely power. What name shall be given him? Peerless among counselors, the mighty God, Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace. Ever wider shall his dominion spread, endlessly at peace. He will sit on David's kingly throne to give it lasting foundations of justice and right; so tenderly he loves us, the Lord of hosts.<sup>14</sup>

The most extensive Isaian prophecies, however, cover the famous “Four Songs,” that spell out the role of the Servant of the Lord (Ebed Yahweh), and who is the same Messiah foretold by David but now in the status of a suffering Victim who offers himself for the sins of mankind.

In the first canticle, the future deliverer is portrayed as a man of rare mildness who is yet strong enough to govern the nations.

Here is my servant, to whom I grant protection, the man of my choice, greatly beloved. My spirit rests upon him, and he will proclaim right order among the Gentiles. He will not be contentious or a lover of faction. None shall hear his voice in the streets. He will not snap the staff that is already crushed, or put out the wick that still smolders; but at last he will establish order unflinchingly. Not with sternness, not with violence; to set up right order on earth, that is his mission. He has a law to give; in the far-off islands men wait for it eagerly.<sup>15</sup>

Characteristically, Matthew cites this passage in full when he describes the Savior’s meekness in dealing with the envy of the Pharisees. They sought to destroy Him because he healed on the Sabbath, but Jesus retired from their midst rather than either expose Himself at the time to their malice or oppose them directly in righteous anger.<sup>16</sup>

The second and third songs recount the divine providence that would surround the Messiah,<sup>17</sup> and the suffering he was to endure as a willing victim of God’s justice.<sup>18</sup> St. Paul draws on both prophecies to delineate the work of the Redeemer.

However, the most extensive and detailed anticipation of the Messiah as *Ebed Yahweh*, the Suffering Servant who would expiate the sins of his people, spans more than a full chapter in Isaiah (52:13-53:12).

Lo! My servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted, and lifted up, and shall be very high. As many were amazed at him.—So marred was his appearance beyond that of a man, and his form beyond that of the sons of men—so shall he startle many nations.

On account of him kings shall shut their mouths; for what has not been told them shall they see, and what they have not heard shall they contemplate.

“Who could have believed what we heard? And the might of the Lord—to whom was it being revealed? For he grew up like a sapling before us, like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or charm, that we should look upon him, no beauty, that we should admire him. He was despised, and avoided by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with pain; and like one from whom men hide their faces. He was despised, and we esteemed him not.”<sup>19</sup>

So far the prediction of the Messiah’s suffering, partly physical but mainly moral. The Servant of Yahweh was to be disgraced and despised by his own people. Then follows a concept that was not new in Judaic eschatology, but never so clearly expressed as in Deutero-Isaiah: that the Savior of Israel would undergo pain and humiliation as an act of voluntary sacrifice; that he would be at once priest (who offers) and victim (who is offered), not for his own sins but for the infidelity of a sinful mankind.

Yet it was our pains that he bore, our sorrows that he carried; while we accounted him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. He was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the chastisement of our welfare was upon him, and through his stripes we were healed. All we like sheep had gone astray. We had turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord made to light upon him the guilt of us all.<sup>20</sup>

The essence of a true sacrifice is the willingness with which something precious is offered to God; and the more free and uncomplaining the oblation, the more perfect the holocaust. Isaiah pre-describes the generosity of Christ’s sacrifice of Himself in a passage that has become classic in Christian worship literature.

When he was oppressed, he humbled himself, and opened not his mouth; like a sheep that is led to the slaughter, or like a ewe that is dumb before her shearers, he opened not his mouth. Through violence in judgment was he taken away, and who gave thought to his fate—how he was cut off from the land of the living, for our transgressions was stricken to death? They made his grave with the wicked, his tomb with evildoers; although he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.<sup>21</sup>

The auto-sacrifice of the Messiah would not be in vain. Comparable to the pain he

was to endure would be the glory in its wake. Again the idea was not foreign to Jewish theology, but only obscurely understood until Isaiah—and the Isaian fulfillment in the new Covenant: that suffering is not only punitive for sin, but also (and principally) remedial, and pain is meant to be undergone not only by the sinner for his own offenses against God, but also (and principally) has a vicarious dimension that is the keystone of the Messianic prophecies.

Yet the Lord saw fit to crush him with pain, so that when he makes himself a guilt-offering, he shall see posterity, shall prolong his life, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. The fruit of his suffering shall he see, and be satisfied.

Through his affliction shall my servant, the Righteous One, bring righteousness to many, and he shall bear their guilt. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and with the strong shall he share the spoil: because he poured out his lifeblood to the utmost, and was numbered with the transgressors, while he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.<sup>22</sup>

Locked up in these verses of Isaiah is the whole of Soteriology, with its implications of Christ saving the world through His voluntary acceptance of pain, of a Mediator who stands between a just God and a sinful human race to intercede as the priest of His people.

Isaiah was supported by two other prophets, Daniel and Jeremiah, who added new characterizations to the Messianic theme that would unfold with the coming of Christ.

Daniel's contribution is the notion of the "Son of Man," that figures so prominently in the Gospels. The context of the vision is apocalyptic and the writing dates from the second century before the Christian era. As described by Daniel, God is holding a solemn investiture in heaven. He is investing one called the "Son of Man" who advances on the clouds. A common Semitic expression, it entered the Bible in various places (Isaiah 19:1; Psalm 67:5).

This vision is also noteworthy in that it distinguishes between the bulk of the Jewish people and the "Remnant" who would be the spiritual Israel and specially gifted from on high with a new and entirely fresh supernatural blessing from God.

Later on, when only a fraction of the Chosen People would accept Jesus as the Messiah, this distinction bears out the parallel streams of tradition about the Anointed One—an earthly liberator from political slavery, and a heavenly Savior from subjection to sin.

Then I saw in my dream, how one was riding on the clouds of heaven, that was yet a son of man; came to where the judge sat, crowned with age, and was ushered into his presence. With that, power was given him, and glory, and sovereignty; obey him all must, man of every race and tribe and tongue; such a reign as lasts forever, such power as his the ages cannot diminish.<sup>23</sup>

As interpreted by Christ in the Gospels, Daniel's prophecy envisages a heavenly leader possessing all the qualities (if not the name) of the Messiah. In contrast with the pagan kingdoms described in the same chapter, the holy people of Israel are also personified by a leader, in fact a heaven-sent individual whose kingdom would last beyond measurable time.

The significance of Jeremiah's prophecy is manifold, but lies especially in its weaving two apparently disparate strands into a single theme: that the Messiah would be born of the House of David and yet that his mission would extend not just to the Jewish people.

“Behold days are coming,” is the oracle of the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous shoot; and he shall reign as king with success, doing justice and righteousness in the land. In his days shall Judah be saved, and Israel shall live in security; and this is the name they shall give him, ‘The Lord is our vindicator.’”

“Therefore behold, days are coming,” is the oracle of the Lord, “when men shall no longer say, ‘As the Lord lives, who brought up and led the descendents of the house of Israel from the north land and from all the other lands to which he had driven them, and settled them on their own land’.”<sup>24</sup>

In a parallel passage, Jeremiah foresees the Messiah as a prince who will be of the same stock as his people, and “their ruler shall come from the midst of them.” But he especially repeats the proverbial consolation of Yahweh to the Jews that, through the Messianic fulfillment, “You shall be my people, and I will be your

God.”<sup>25</sup>

### THREE-FOLD ANOINTING

As commonly understood, the Messiah of the prophets was to be at once a king, teacher and priest—and for each divinely-appointed role would be anointed by God.

There is a close correlation among these qualities, and any insight afforded by the Old Testament will help better to know Christ. They correspond to the familiar triad of code, creed and cult, familiar in the history of organized religion.

As king, therefore, the Messiah would enjoy visible transcendence over his people. He would have authority over them, to govern their lives in the society he would found, and with no apologies for limiting their liberty in the pursuit of a common (and greater) good. Yet this royalty was to symbolize a higher transcendence still, anticipated, for example, in the Psalms. More than once in the Old Testament, the “One that is to come,” is described in terms that exceed human or created things.

Why do the nations rage, and the people plot in vain? The kings of earth stand up, and the princes take counsel, against the Lord and against His anointed (*Mashijah*). “Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us.” He that sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord makes sport of them.

Let me tell of the decree of the Lord. He said to me, “You are my son; today have I begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, and the ends of the earth your possession.”<sup>26</sup>

Nowhere else in the Old Testament does Yahweh say that a specific person is begotten of God or that the Lord gives him birth. When Jesus was questioning the Pharisees, He settled on this passage to identify Himself as more than Son of David; otherwise why should the Messiah be addressed as Lord?

Coupled with such Messianic titles as *Emmanuel* (God with us) in Isaiah, *El Gibbor* (Strong God), and equivalent names like “Father of the world to come,” and “Prince of peace,” the royalty of the Messiah included a divine transcendence which sober scholarship recognizes.

All the prophets of the Old Law were preparatory to The Prophet, whose teaching office would surpass theirs even as his mission was to bring the knowledge of God to all nations, while theirs was to instruct the people of Israel.

Where the prophets preceding Christ communicated the ancient Covenant, the Messiah would establish another Testament, at once universal and eternal, and destined to be consummated only in heaven.

Moreover, where other prophets were gifted with some wisdom and understanding, the Messiah would have the fullness of the spirit of God. "Upon him," Isaiah foretold, "shall rest the spirit of Yahweh, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of Yahweh."<sup>27</sup> God's spirit would, therefore, enlighten and strengthen the Messiah as teacher of mankind. He would have wisdom to choose the best means of attaining his purpose; understanding to apply these means with maximum effectiveness; counsel to instruct others and help them to understand; fortitude to remain steadfast in teaching although opposed by his enemies and rejected by those whom he came to save; knowledge of divine mysteries that were hidden from the foundations of the world; and the fear of Yahweh that was the basis for the highest sanctity.

The object of the Messiah's prophetic mission was to proclaim knowledge of God. For centuries before the Christian era, a call to the office of prophet imposed a heavy burden: to teach faith in one true God when all around them was polytheism and idolatry, and to demand obedience to divine precepts that human nature resisted. Consistent with the same mission, the Messiah was to bring new knowledge of God, which Christianity synthesizes in its faith in the Trinity and Incarnation; and new obligations on man's liberty in response to a higher code of morality.

There is a logical connection between prophecy (as teaching) and the priesthood. A prophet stands midway from God to the people, communicating what God teaches him to teach his fellowmen. As prophet he is a seer whose vision is of divine mysteries and whose task is to require faith in his revelations. A priest is the obverse of prophet. His office is to mediate from the people to God, to make intercession for them to the divine mercy, and offer sacrifice in their name.

Yahweh had solemnly declared to His Anointed One, "You are a priest for ever

after the manner of Melchizedek.”<sup>28</sup> It was left to Christian history to show how Melchizedek typified the Messiah and his sacrifice the oblation of Christ. Melchizedek was both king and priest; his ancestors are nowhere given, suggesting that he owed his priesthood not to natural heredity but to a special act of God; when he “brought out bread and wine,” this may at least imply that when he offered sacrifice the sacrificial gifts would have been the objects present. St. Paul dwells at length on the priesthood of Christ anticipated in the priesthood of Melchizedek, mainly because (unlike the Jewish *sacerdotium*) it did not come by carnal inheritance and would not end in foreseeable time. It was conferred directly by God and was destined to last forever.<sup>29</sup>

## **PART FOUR**

### **SPIRITUAL TEACHING OF THE GOSPELS**

At this point in our study of Sacred Scripture, we enter on the ocean of the Gospel teaching on the spiritual life. Our purpose will be to go through chapter after chapter, even verse after verse, of the four evangelists, to learn from them what the Holy Spirit is teaching us about the following of Christ and the growth in sanctity. After all, this is the main reason why the Gospels were revealed in the first place. It will also be the main focus of our prayerful reflections on what the Holy Spirit has revealed to the world during Christ's visible stay on earth.

## Chapter XI

### CHRISTIANITY IS HISTORICAL

If there is one distinctive feature of Christianity, it is its verifiable, factual history. No other religion except Judaism before the time of Christ, and no other religion except Christianity can be called authentically historical.

Over the years in teaching comparative religion, Hinduism and Buddhism, Shinto and Islam, Taoism and Jainism, I have found that they are all, in greater or less measure, pious forms of mythology.

### THE GOSPELS ARE FACTUAL

Our first and clearest witness to the historicity of the Gospels is St. Luke, the physician who became a disciple of Christ and the companion of St. Paul. The first four verses of his Gospel could not be more clear.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to draw up a narrative concerning the things that have been fulfilled among us, even as they who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, I also have determined, after following up all things carefully from the very first, to write for thee, most excellent Theophilus, an orderly account, that thou mayest understand the certainty of the words in which thou hast been instructed.

St. Luke makes it plain that those who had already written about Christ were eyewitnesses to the events which they narrated. That is why he, too, decided to write his Gospel and send it to Theophilus, which literally means “a friend of God.” Theophilus was a Christian of distinguished rank and office. St. Luke dedicated both his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to Theophilus. The evangelist knew that this zealous convert and patron would have his works carefully copied and widely distributed.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of two facts: that the Gospels were put in written form within less than one generation after the death and resurrection

of Christ, and that the evangelists, we might almost say, were scrupulous in narrating the events they describe in precise, factually verifiable terms.

In the first century of the Christian era, most people could neither read nor write. Yet, the Gospels were communicated to the believers in written form. The benefits of a written, rather than a merely oral New Testament, are immense:

- What is written is basically unchangeable. As Pilate told the Jews who objected to the inscription on Christ's cross on Calvary, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," he told them, "What I have written, I have written." The Latin is worth quoting, "*Quod scripsi, scripsi.*"
- What is written can be passed on, not only to one's contemporaries, but from one generation to another, in fact, from one century to another.
- What is written remains constant. Unless the letters are tampered with, they remain the same, no matter how many people have a copy of what is written.
- What is written in alphabetical form has a specific meaning that the letters of the words signify. Not coincidentally, the alphabet was discovered about the same time that the Sacred Scriptures began to be written for the chosen people of the Old Testament.
- What is written is remembered. There is no sure way of protecting ideas than to write them down. This protection is not only from injudicious or malicious changing by people. It is especially protection from the notorious capacity of the human mind to forget.
- What is written can be multiplied indefinitely. For the first fourteen hundred years of Christian history, the Bible was passed on by laborious transcription by hand-written manuscripts. With the discovery of moveable type in the second half of the fifteenth century, the Bible began to be reproduced in print, and ever since, has been the most widely read book in the world.

## **THE GOSPELS ARE NOT IMAGINARY**

We simply take for granted that the Gospel narrative is factual. What the evangelists describe really took place. This may seem to be secondary, but its primacy is of the very essence of our Christian faith. St. Luke speaks of "a narrative concerning the things that have been fulfilled among us." He speaks of

“eyewitnesses and ministers of the word handed down to us.” He says that he decided to follow up “all things carefully from the very first.” Why all this solicitude? In order that Christians “may understand the certainty of the words” in which they have been instructed.

Certitude of mind is the foundation for courage in the will. The followers of Christ are expected to be His courageous followers, even to laying down their lives for His name. But they must be convinced believers, since conviction is the basis of courage. The root of this conviction is the historicity of Christ’s life and teaching, preserved until the end of time in the written words of the Gospels.

## Chapter XII

### THE WORD OF GOD

There may be some value in beginning this chapter with an apology. The apology is for quoting the first eighteen verses of the opening chapter of St. John's Gospel. This will be the pattern that we plan to follow in the future.

The central theme on which we are reflecting is the Word of God. St. John wrote his Gospel at the end of the first century of Christianity. The reason was that already by the year 100 AD, heresies had arisen which denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. As a personal witness of the Savior's life, death and resurrection, John was preserved as the last of the Apostles in order to testify, better than anyone else, to who Christ really was. He was and is the living God. In the language of the beloved disciple, Jesus is the Word of God.

First, then, the full quotation of the opening verses of the fourth Gospel. The translation is that of the Vulgate, which is the most authentic that we have. For the last 1500 years, the Vulgate has been used in all the official documents of the Holy See and all the general councils of the Catholic Church since the early fifth century.

In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God;  
and the Word was God.  
He was in the beginning with God.  
All things were made through Him,  
and without Him was made  
nothing that has been made.  
In Him was life,  
and the life was the light of men.  
And the light shines in the darkness;  
and the darkness grasped it not.  
There was a man,  
one sent from God,  
whose name was John.  
This man came as a witness,

to bear witness concerning the light,  
that all might believe through him.  
He was not himself the light,  
but was to bear witness to the light.  
It was the true light  
that enlightens every man  
who comes into the world.  
He was in the world,  
and the world was made through Him,  
and the world knew Him not.  
He came unto His own,  
and His own received Him not.  
But to as many as received Him  
He gave the power of becoming sons of God;  
Who were born not of blood,  
nor of the will of the flesh,  
nor of the will of man,  
but of God.  
And the Word was made flesh,  
and dwelt among us.  
And we saw His glory—  
glory as of the only-begotten of the Father—  
full of grace and of truth.  
John bore witness concerning Him,  
and cried, “This was He of whom I said,  
‘He who is to come after me  
has been set above me,  
because He was before me.’”  
And of His fullness  
we have all received  
grace for grace.  
For the Law was given through Moses;  
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.  
No one has at any time seen God.  
The only-begotten Son,  
who is in the bosom of the Father,  
He has revealed Him.

Commentators have pointed out that this opening passage of John's Gospel is in the form of Hebrew poetry. It is written in verse form and its vocabulary is a synthesis of everything on which Christianity is founded. It is certainly more than just a preface, like that of the opening verses of the Gospel of St. Luke. It is rather a synthesis of everything which Christ taught and did during his visible stay in Palestine. He tells us that there is only one mediator between God and man: the God who became man in order to bring spiritual life and light into a world that, except for Him, would still be walking in darkness and the shadow of death.

## **THE WORD IN HIMSELF**

In the Greek language of the fourth Gospel, the term for the Word is *Logos*, which can mean "word" or "thought" or "reason." The Jews of the Old Testament use the Hebrew *memra* to describe personified Wisdom in the books of Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus.

No doubt St. John borrowed the term *Logos* from the inspired books of the Old Law, but in the evangelist, this is no mere abstraction. The Word is an eternal, divine person. Nowhere, either in the Hebrew Scriptures, nor in the Greek philosophers of pre-Christian paganism, does the Word mean what the Holy Spirit inspired the apostle to call the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.

St. John tells us that the Word was in the beginning, and he adds that the Word was not only with God, but was God. The whole rest of St. John's Gospel is built on this foundation, that the Word which is God is the Word which became man in the person of Jesus Christ. The evangelist adds that "all things were made through Him, and without Him was made nothing that has been made." The Word of God, therefore, is the Creator of the universe. Everything which exists in the world, whether spiritual or material, has been made out of nothing by Him.

When John tells us that "in Him was life, and the life was the light of men," he is saying far more than the words indicate. He is telling us that when God created the human race, He endowed it with a share in His own divine life. The supernatural life that our first parents received was nothing less than a participation in the very divinity of the Creator. This participation endowed Adam and Eve with the capacity for knowing God by faith here on earth and by vision in the world to come. How this needs to be emphasized. We share in the divine nature to the

extent that we know who God is, now by believing in Him and in heaven by seeing Him face to face.

If there are two words that dominate St. John's Gospel, they are life and light, in the Latin Vulgate *Vita* from the Greek *Zoe*, and *Lux* from the Greek *Phos*. These two are related as cause and effect. The cause of our supernatural existence is the life of God who animates our souls; the principal effect of this divine life is for the mind to believe in God here on earth and to see Him face to face in eternity. As the Gospel moves on, we shall see how deeply the evangelist understands what the Incarnation has brought to the human race, nothing less than a share in Christ's divinity and a participation in His own divine knowledge.

## **THE MISSION OF THE WORD**

The evangelist carefully distinguishes between the role of St. John the Baptist as the precursor of Christ, and Christ as the Divine Person who was sent by the Father to enlighten and thus redeem the world. As important as John the Baptist was in identifying Jesus as the promised Redeemer, he was not the Redeemer. His task was to bear witness to the Light who is the Word of God come in to the world to enlighten the human race and thus enable sinful man to be saved.

It is surely remarkable that in less than three verses, the evangelist identifies Jesus Christ as the Light. In the language of Scripture, light corresponds to knowledge. We have eyes in order to see with our bodies; we have a mind to see with our souls. But having bodily eyes is not enough to see; there must also be light to be able to perceive material things. So too it is not enough to have a mind with which we can know; there must also be the supernatural light of divine grace to enable us to understand what our minds are told.

As the fourth Gospel is at such pains to explain, Christ is both the Truth that we must know and the Light which enables us to see the truth. That is why God became man: both to teach us what we need to know in order to reach our eternal destiny, and give us the means of understanding what the God-man has revealed.

## Chapter XIII

### THE ANNUNCIATION AND INCARNATION

The single most important narrative in the New Testament is the Annunciation of Our Lady, when the archangel Gabriel invited her to become the Mother of God. Everything in Christianity depends on this fact. The history of the human race is divided into B.C. and A.D., that is, Before Christ and *Anno Domini*, in the Year of the Lord.

What is most basic about the Annunciation is that it was an event of verifiable history. There was a young woman, named Mary, who lived at Nazareth in Galilee. An angel of God really appeared to her in human form and spoke to her in human language. She listened to him and spoke to him. Their conversation was very short, but although its consequences began in time, they will continue into the endless ages of eternity.

As before, we shall first quote the full account of this dialogue as recorded by St. Luke the evangelist.

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,

to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.

And when the angel had come to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women."

When she had heard him she was troubled at his word, and kept pondering what manner of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God.

Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a Son; and thou shalt call His name Jesus.

He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of David His father, and He shall be king over the house of Jacob forever;

and of His kingdom there shall be no end."

But Mary said to the angel, "How shall this happen, since I do not

know man?”

And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee and therefore the Holy One to be born shall be called the Son of God.

And behold, Elizabeth thy kinswoman also has conceived in her old age, and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month; for nothing is impossible with God.”

But Mary said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word.” And the angel departed from her.

Before we begin our reflections on this cardinal narrative of the Gospels, it may be well to explain a few facts of recorded history. The evangelist says that the angel was sent to Mary in the sixth month, which meant the sixth month after Elizabeth had conceived her son John. The prelude to the Annunciation of Mary was the annunciation to Zachary. In both cases, it was the same angel Gabriel who appeared. As we know, Zachary doubted what the angel had told him, that his wife would conceive in her old age.

It was the archangel Gabriel who appeared to Our Lady and Luke explicitly states that he was sent from God. That is what angel means, a messenger from God sent on a mission to human beings. Nazareth was an obscure town nestled among the hills of Galilee. Although not mentioned in the Old Testament, it is referred to frequently in the New Testament, because that is where Jesus was conceived and where He lived. That is why He is called the Nazarene.

Mary is identified as a virgin. In the original of St. Luke, she is said to be *parthenos*, which is the Greek word for a strict virgin. Moreover, Mary was betrothed to Joseph. This means much more than being engaged, but less than married. The Jewish marriage laws came in two parts. First was the sealing of the marriage contract, where the groom gave a certain sum of money to the father of the bride, and the bride received her dowry, usually equal to the purchase price from her father. The second ceremony was separated by several months, usually a year from the first. This was the solemn induction of the bride into the groom’s home, which involved the blessing of fruitfulness on the young couple and the joyful wedding feast.

When the angel came to Mary, he addressed her, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women.” A standard professedly Catholic New Testament has the angel say, “Hail, favored one!” This is an arbitrary translation which ignores the Church’s twenty centuries of faith. Every Hail Mary in the Catholic Church continues, “full of grace.”

There are three standard meanings to the name “Mary” as found in the Hebrew language. Mary first of all means “Lady,” or “beautiful,” or “well-beloved.” It was the favorite name given to Jewish women at the time of Christ.

How was Mary blessed among women? To be blessed means to be made happy by God. Our Lady was blessed because she was full of grace. She was blessed because God chose her to be His Mother. She was blessed because she would cooperate with her divine Son in His redemption of the world. However, she not only was blessed. She is blessed because she remains the channel of her Son’s grace, which He communicates to the human race.

We may be surprised at Mary’s reaction. We are told she was troubled at the angel’s word and kept wondering what she was being told. Gabriel sensed her difficulty. He assured her that she had nothing to fear, because she had found grace with God. Behind her fear was not a doubt, but wonderment. The angel assured her that she would conceive in her womb and bring forth a Son and name Him Jesus, which means Savior. The heavenly messenger went on to tell Mary that this Son of hers would be the Son of the Most High. Then follow four royal prophecies. Mary’s Son would have a throne, no less than the throne of David; He shall be king forever, and His kingdom will never end.

After this marvelous prediction, Mary, unlike Zachary, did not doubt. But she did have a question. How would all of this take place, “since I do not know man?”

At this point, believing Christians differ by mountains from those who are either not professed Christians or who have abandoned the true Christian faith. The prophet Isaiah foretells the coming of the Messiah. Ahaz, king of Judah, was told by the Lord to ask for a miraculous sign that he would conquer his enemies. But Ahaz hypocritically expresses his preference for depending on military power rather than on God. Says Ahaz, “I will not ask! I will not tempt the Lord.” Then the Lord declared, “Listen, O house of David! Is it not enough for you to weary men, must you also weary my God? Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you

this sign: The virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel” (Isaiah 7:10-14).

The original Hebrew of Isaiah had the word *almah*, which could be translated as a young, unmarried woman. But the Greek Septuagint of Isaiah, in the second century before Christ, translated *almah* as *parthenos*, which means a strict virgin. Until the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D., the Jews had no trouble reading their prophecy in Isaiah as, “the virgin shall be with child.” Then, by the end of the first century of the Christian era, the Jews re-translated the Isaian prophecy as, “the young woman shall be with child.”

We know from the New Testament what the prophecy of Isaiah really said. When St. Joseph found out that Mary was with child, an angel appeared to him to reassure him that she had conceived her child by the Holy Spirit. Then the evangelist Matthew explains, “all this was so ordained to fulfill the word which the Lord spoke by His prophet: Behold the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel, which means, God with us” (Matthew 1:20-23).

Our Lady’s virginity is of critical importance. Absolutely speaking, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity could have been conceived by natural intercourse. But Christ wanted to make sure that His unique Sonship of the eternal Father would be miraculously confirmed by His virginal conception of a human Mother.

The angel Gabriel explained to Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her. Therefore, “the Holy One to be born shall be called the Son of God.” Gabriel went on, “Elizabeth, thy kinswoman, also has conceived a son in her old age, and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month; for nothing shall be impossible with God.”

As we follow the divine logic, we see to what extremes God will go to make our faith in His revelation credible. God worked the miracle of having the aged, barren Elizabeth conceive John the Baptist. Why? In order to make His Son’s conception of a virginal Mother more reasonably believable. There was no more effective way of proving Mary’s virginity, and therefore Christ’s virginal conception, than to have the elderly and sterile Elizabeth already in her sixth month of pregnancy at the Annunciation of Our Lady.

The Incarnation of the Son of God took place the moment Mary said to the angel, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word.”

At this point, we could begin not just a volume, but a library of prayerful meditation on what happened the moment Mary accepted God’s invitation to become His Mother.

But one most important observation should be made. No sooner did the Blessed Virgin conceive her Incarnate Lord than the Holy Eucharist became part of human history.

In a world that has become demented with self-idolatry, how we need to believe that the Son of God who became the Son of Mary at the Annunciation is in our midst today.

## Chapter XIV

### THE VISITATION

The Visitation of Our Lady is recounted only by St. Luke. He is what the Church calls the evangelist of Mary. No sooner does he say that the angel Gabriel left the Blessed Virgin after the Annunciation than he describes what she did after hearing that her kinswoman Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy.

Because of its deep significance, we will first speak about the Visitation. Then, in another chapter, we will meditate on the Magnificat, in which the Blessed Virgin gives us the clearest insight into her own Immaculate Heart.

Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, "Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honored with a visit from the mother of my Lord? For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy. Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.

The first thing that strikes us in the evangelist's account of Mary's Visitation is that she "went as quickly as she could" to help her kinswoman, who was in her sixth month. St. Ambrose comments on this fact by saying that charity is always in a hurry to help someone in need. This is one of the themes of both the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles of St. Luke. God makes sure there are people in need so that others can meet these needs and thus fulfill our principal duty on earth, to show our love for God by meeting the needs of those whom He places into our lives.

As soon as Mary reached Zechariah's house, she greeted Elizabeth. Notice Our Lady went into the house of Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, who doubted the angel's prediction that his sterile wife would conceive in her old age. Unlike Zechariah, Mary did not doubt that she would conceive while remaining a virgin. It was therefore faith paying a visit to doubt.

No sooner did Elizabeth hear Mary's greeting than the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy and his mother was filled with the Holy Spirit.

## **MEDIA TRIX OF GRACE**

There is no question that Pope John Paul II wants to formally define the doctrine of Mary as Mediatrix of divine grace. He may do so.

It is here that we need to explain what the title of Our Lady as Mediatrix of grace really means. She began to mediate grace to a fallen human race the moment she told the angel, "Be it done to me according to your word." This is the first and primary meaning of Mary's mediation.

All the grace that the human race has received since the fall of our first parents, and will receive until the end of time, comes from Christ, but through His Mother Mary. Except for her, there would not be the divine Mediator who, as God, is the source of all the grace that any human being has or will ever receive. But, this God became man in order to channel this grace to a fallen mankind. As the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, Christ is the Author of His grace. But the same Jesus as the Son of Mary is the conduit through which He communicates the grace of which He is the divine Creator. It is in this fundamental sense that the Blessed Virgin is co-mediatrix of all grace. Except for Christ, there would be no grace. But except for Mary, there would be no Christ.

However, Mary's mediation only began at the Annunciation. No sooner had she conceived her divine Son, than she was privileged to be His cooperator in channeling this grace to others. The first beneficiary of this Marian mediation was the unborn John the Baptist.

It is the Church's common teaching that as soon as Our Lady greeted Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth's womb was sanctified. Of course, he was sanctified by the unborn Savior but, as we must say, through the voice of His Mother Mary, the moment she greeted Elizabeth. Unlike Mary, John was not conceived without sin, but, like Mary, he was born without sin, shall we say, because of Mary.

The moment John was sanctified, his mother was filled with the Holy Spirit. Thus

divinely enlightened, she gave a loud cry and addressed Our Lady in words that, by now, have been spoken over the centuries by all the lips that recite the Hail Mary.

We pray, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee,” so far repeating the angel’s greeting at the Annunciation. Then we continue, “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.”

As I was meditating on this conference, I decided that this would be the most logical place for sharing with you a prayerful commentary on the Hail Mary. If there is one vocal prayer that is typically Catholic it is the *Hail Mary*. We say it so many times in different ways, but especially in the recitation of the Angelus and the rosary, and by now must have said it some thousands of times. As we know the present *Hail Mary* is really two prayers, one after the other: the *Hail Mary* properly so-called, and what not too many centuries ago was called the *Holy Mary*. Confessors would tell their penitents to recite, say, three or five or whatever the number of *Holy Marys*. We say it so many times almost subconsciously that if there is correspondingly any one vocal prayer that deserves to be looked at more closely it is this one. My plan is to take this prayer in sequence word for word, or better, term for term, in a prolonged meditation on what its sentiments really mean.

## **HAIL MARY**

This is no casual greeting. It is more than a meaningless “hello” that the angel addressed to Mary at the Annunciation. The best rendition of the word “hail” is “rejoice,” “be happy,” and it contains a messianic reference to the joy that God had in store for man by becoming Man. It is, moreover, an imperative telling Mary to be joyful, that the dawn of man’s salvation was at hand.

The title “Mary” was hers before she was so addressed by the angel. It means, among other things, “Lady,” corresponding to our English word, “Lord.” “Lord” for Christ; “Lady” for Mary. She is then the “Domina” even as He is the “Dominus.” It is, in fact, the revealed basis for Mary’s Queenship. She was to be the Mother of the Lord of the Universe and therefore the Queen of mankind. One of the most popular devotions in France, I am told, for some time now is devotion to Mary, Queen of the Universe. Makes sense, if her Son is *Lord* of the Universe. That is what the title “Mary” means.

## **FULL OF GRACE**

Our version of the *Hail Mary* is based on the Vulgate translation of the Bible. As you know, this translation was done by St. Jerome in the early fifth century on order of Pope Saint Damasus I. It is the one and only translation that has been formally approved by an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church. Not only approved, but declared by the Council to be authentic, that is, this translation (I am speaking of the whole Bible, including this passage) contains accurately the substance of God's revelation to man. There are, as by now we know, many other translations of the corresponding Greek words in the New Testament text, for example, "so highly favored," or just, "highly favored," but these translations are merely verbal renditions of the Greek. They did not contain the fullness of doctrinal content that the Church considers to be contained in what is really meant by the words: *gratia plena*.

How, we ask, is Mary "full of grace"? She is full of grace first of all because she was conceived without original sin. Anyone who is in the possession of grace from the first moment of his or her conception would be without original sin. Mary was. Moreover, throughout life she received such an abundance of grace as no one except Christ ever had or will obtain. Again she received grace that not only began her life immaculate, but it kept her absolutely sinless. She remained free from the least even indeliberate venial sin all through life. Then, too, she received grace that kept all her desires totally under control. Unlike the rest of us, Mary had no unruly passions. She had desires, strong desires, but they were always totally submissive to reason under the influence of this fullness of grace. Finally, and most emphatically, she received the unique grace of being invited to become the Mother of the Author of grace. That is quite graceful!

## **THE LORD IS WITH THEE**

This is a direct quotation from the Archangel Gabriel. How, we ask, was the Lord with Mary? He was with her by the grace of His friendship which she enjoyed. Notice the Lord was not only near her or in her, but with her. He was also with her by the faith that she had in what God had revealed about His coming to redeem the human race. St. Augustine, among other Fathers of the Church, tells us that Mary had first conceived God in spirit by faith before she conceived Him in the flesh in

her body. It was her deep faith that especially, as far as we can use the language, invited the grace of becoming the Mother of Christ.

The Lord was with Mary, and remained with Mary, by His astounding Providence. God, we should tell ourselves, never gives any grace in isolation. He does not just, as it were, give grace and then walk away. The Lord was with her because He surrounded her with His care and arranged everything in her life to fulfill His providential purpose in her life. But, we should then add, the Lord *was* with Mary, because she was with Him. This was already before the Incarnation. That “with” implies a conjunction. You are not really with somebody, whatever the preposition means, unless the person is correspondingly also with you.

She, we may safely believe, was always thinking about God. She was also with Him in will. She was always doing what He wanted. She was with Him in heart. As the evangelists record Mary’s speech we do not hear her speaking very often. Yet, on the few occasions when a dialogue is recorded between Mary and her Son, she expresses the most tender, motherly affection. We may be sure she thought of God a lot, she did God’s will and she was speaking to Him in sentiments of affection every time she could.

## **BLESSED ART THOU AMONG WOMEN**

We turn now from what the angel said to Mary to how she was greeted by her kinswoman Elizabeth: “Of all women you are the most blessed.” What does this mean? It means first of all that Mary was unique among all women in becoming a mother without losing her virginity. Mary was unique because she was the Mother of the Messiah. Mary was especially unique among women because the Child she carried in her womb was her Creator. When she gave birth to Christ she could tell Him, or speaking of Him, say: “This is my body,” because it was of her that He took on human flesh. So that we teach and we believe: *caro Jesu, caro Mariae*. When God decided to become man He chose to take His flesh of a woman. Surely that Mother was unique.

But Elizabeth does not say merely that Mary was unique among women. That is not what Luke tells us. Elizabeth calls Mary “blessed” which means “happy.” This is two greetings of “happiness” in a row, all in the same chapter of Luke—one from the angel, the other from her relative. Our Lady, then, was the happiest of

women, in order to reassure us that God wants us already in this life to be happy. And what is the condition of happiness? The one perfectly verified by Mary. It was her humble acceptance of God's will, her submission to His mysterious, and how mysterious, designs.

The greatest problem with God's mysteries is not really that we cannot wrap our finite minds around the infinitely mysterious God; the problem is that some of God's mysteries have to be lived. Mary lived in mystery, which means that she lived God's will without ever fully understanding *why*. And the two dramatic occasions when she asked questions—remember?—one at the Annunciation and the other at the finding in the Temple, reveal for all times what we need especially to learn from this happiest of women—*that she walked in darkness. The darkness of faith!* Sure she believed, but that is what faith means—you believe without fully understanding. Mary's joy, therefore, was a result of Mary's conformity to the will of God. Need we add, there is no other means available to man in this valley of tears to be happy. The secret is to do His will without demanding an explanation from God.

## **AND BLESSED IS THE FRUIT OF THY WOMB, JESUS**

Elizabeth said not only that Mary was happy, but that the Child in her womb was happy, too. So He was because already in the womb Christ's humanity was substantially united to the Word of God. Already when enveloped in the flesh of His Mother and yet unborn, Christ as Man enjoyed the beatific vision of the Trinity. Who would not be happy in beholding the face of God? Mystics have written eloquently about Christ's hidden life but let us remind ourselves that this hidden life began in the womb. His happiness in this hiding is a lesson for all of us who find being unknown or unrecognized or forgotten so hard to take. In a small gathering of people, when soft drinks were being served, I noticed one person was overlooked. He held back for a few minutes, but then I could tell how humiliated he was that just thoughtlessly nobody served him. How human! How we dread to be ignored. How we want, how we want, to be recognized.

Like His Mother, Christ was doing the will of God. He was happy because He was doing it. Here we touch on the touchstone of the experience of sanctity. No one in his right mind, who has strived to do God's will, denies that this can be costly. It makes demands on our self-sacrifice. So we ask, what is the compensation? No

one does anything unless they get something out of it. What do the great saints and friends of God, what—let us be frank—what do they get out of doing God’s will? How I like this passage from Ignatius: “The highest reward that a servant of Jesus should expect in this world from human beings is what his Master received from His own contemporaries: opposition, crucifixion, and death.” But does God give something to those who serve Him? Yes! But this yes you do not talk about. This yes you must experience. It is the experience of joy that no one else can give except God and He gives to no one except to those who are doing His will and in the exact measure in which they do it.

## **HOLY MARY**

Mary has many titles in the Litany of our Lady. She has more titles in the churches in Rome, and still more in the Byzantine Liturgy. I never counted them, but I am told there is a different feast with a different title for our Lady for every day in the Byzantine calendar. Yet this one title, “Holy Mary,” has been given to her by the Church because she was the holiest of human beings; she was the holiest of creatures, always after Christ, who is God.

She practiced all the virtues to a sublime degree. She never sinned, but, and I think this bears some emphasis, she was mainly holy not so much by what she did, because as far as we can tell she did not do anything extraordinary; she was mainly so holy because of what she was. She possessed the grace of God. We should emphasize this further, that her holiness was not only because she was the Mother of Christ, indeed, the Mother of God, but because she was in the friendship of God and this kind of holiness we all have access to, and please God, we all possess, trusting that we are in His friendship. We share this essential sanctity with Mary, because we are in the state of grace.

To be noted, however, is that when we address Mary as holy, we are not only speaking of her holiness *then*. When is that? When she still lived on earth. We are also talking to Mary and addressing her as holy *now*. She is holy because she *now* possesses in heaven a treasury of glory comparable to the fullness of grace she had on earth.

Grace on earth is a condition for glory. The degree of grace is a measure of glory. Though the expression would sound odd, we could legitimately say, instead of

speaking of Mary as full of grace, that being now in heaven she is full of glory. She is the most fully glorified of God's creatures, always after her own divine Son. This holiness of our Lady is not only to be praised. It is also to be invoked. She is so powerful in heaven as our intercessor because she is so close to God. The closer a person is to God, the more holy he is. This is another simple word for holiness: closeness to God. Mary is the closest to God. Because she is that close to God, that is, so holy, she is more powerful before the throne of God, than any other angel or saint.

Moreover, Mary's holiness is not only to be admired and invoked. It is also to be imitated. She is our model of holiness. She is, as the spiritual writers tell us, the *imitatrix Christi*, the imitator of Christ. Perfect! She is the one who faithfully mirrored His sanctity in the many virtues she practiced. But let us note with Mary, though undoubtedly she practiced the moral virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, it was especially her practice of what we call the theological virtue of charity that made her so like Christ in spirit, because she loved Him, who was like her in body, because He was her Son.

## **MOTHER OF GOD**

Already Elizabeth addressed Mary as "the Mother of my Lord." And so the Church has been doing ever since. She was God's Mother because she conceived and gave birth to Jesus Christ who is God, that is why she was immaculately conceived. When God gives a vocation He always plans ahead of time. Knowing that she was to become the Ark of the Covenant and the first Tabernacle of the Most High, He prepared her body and soul already at her conception. That is also why she was eventually assumed into heaven not only in soul, but also in body. Makes supernatural sense that she might be in the flesh in the company of the Word of God to whom she had given flesh.

This title "Mother of God" is the index of a true faith. By this standard in the early centuries, heresy was identified. Those who admitted that Mary was the Mother of God were those who believed that her Son was God. So it has been ever since. For years, I have been dealing with our separated brethren on their theological faculties. How well I know that only those really believe in Christ's divinity who accept Mary's divine maternity. Anyone who has reservations about Mary being the Mother of God, has reservations about her Son being the Incarnate God.

## **PRAY FOR US SINNERS NOW AND AT THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH**

This closing invocation to the Blessed Virgin is at once a confession and a plea. It is a confession that we, unlike Mary, are all sinners. Remember that description of the episodes surrounding the apparitions of our Lady to St. Bernadette at Lourdes when our Lady would recite the rosary with Bernadette? Remember what Mary did as far as Bernadette could tell? She would skip saying the *Hail Mary*, quite correctly. Whatever other reason she had, she could not possibly invoke herself. But most of all she could not possibly call herself what she was not, a sinner. We are! We are, unlike Mary, sinners by inheritance. We have been conceived, let us use the word, “maculately.” We have been conceived with a “macula,” the stain of the sin that the whole human race except Christ and His Mother, we believe, has inherited.

We are, moreover, sinners by environment. No doubt the society in which Mary lived was in its own way also a sinful society, but unlike Mary we have been not only stained by sin when we came into the world, we have further been stained by the sin of the people around us. We have especially been stained and are sinners by commission, by having offended the God against whom every offense is a sin. We, then, confess that we are sinners.

But besides being a confession, it is a plea. The plea is that Mary might intercede with Christ for us. First of all, now—right now—as we sinners are frightened by the memory of our past sins, as we struggle with ourselves and with others to keep out of sin. One of the hardest things in dealing with people is to keep from becoming entangled in their sins. So we pray that we might be helped now.

We end by asking that we might be protected at the hour of our death. This is our daily and many times daily prayer for final perseverance. Let’s be clear in what we are saying. The Church bids us believe that we need to pray for the gift of final perseverance which is not by itself merited even by a lifetime of virtue.

Just because a person has lived a good life does not, by itself, guarantee dying in God’s friendship. Over and above this, we must pray for the extraordinary grace that the moment before we enter eternity we receive the gift of dying in the friendship of God. This grace will be given, but not because we have earned it by

living a good life. In other words, virtue alone is no promise of dying in the state of grace. We must moreover pray for the grace of a happy death. It is the single greatest grace that any human being can receive. No other can compare with it. And this grace, the Church tells us, must be constantly and earnestly prayed for. That is what we are praying for and confidently hope for because we are asking the Mother of the God who will judge us the moment we die. We are asking her to ask her Son to be merciful. He will be because He loves her. Mary always obtains whatever she wants, provided we have the faith to trust her and the humility to admit our need.

## Chapter XV

### MARY MAGNIFIES THE LORD

Prayerful reflection on Mary's Magnificat is always in order. It is the longest discourse we have recorded of the contents of Mary's heart. Totally inspired, it is the perfect prayer of *humility*. It is a sublime prayer of humble adoration. The Magnificat has been a part of the Church's liturgy since the first century. Ancient monks and hermits recited it daily and it might well be said to be The Prayer of Consecrated Persons.

As all the Church Fathers and the great biblical masters of the ages have affirmed, there are four parts to the Magnificat, each with its own revealing theme. In the first part, Mary expresses her gratitude to God. In the second, she praises God for His power, His holiness and His mercy. In the third, she compares how differently God deals with the proud and the humble. And in the fourth, she recalls that all the ancient prophecies to the Jews are now being fulfilled in the Messiah, who was already then in her womb.

We begin with the gratitude of Mary. "My soul magnifies the Lord." This is another way of saying, "My soul praises, honors, adores and admires the Lord." Always the stress is on the Lord. What a contrast between Mary's attitude and that of so many people over the centuries, including today. Think of all the praise and honor, medals and statues honoring human beings who sadly often deserve blame, even condemnation, rather than praise. Think of the heroes we have studied about—the great heroes whose exploits we had to memorize. There have been men who have destroyed whole races of people to achieve their ambitions. We all remember Napoleon but how many of us remember the Pope he forced into exile? How strange that we should be so ready to praise human beings and so slow to praise God who deserves our every consideration.

Faith tells us that the prayer of praise and of adoration is the first and the most important form of prayer we can offer to God. Indeed, unless this form of prayer is at least implicit, we are not even praying, because when we praise (or as Mary says, when we "magnify" God), what are we doing? We are acknowledging God for who He is and by contrast, admitting what we are. "How great thou art, O Lord, how great thou art!" And by contrast, how little and trifling is everything

and everyone else.

Then Mary adds, “And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Joy follows praise. God wants us to be happy. He wants us to rejoice in Him, but to rejoice in doing His will and not that of the world, the devil, or that of our own human inclinations. It is, indeed, a lie to think that we are happy doing our own wills. Such thinking was not only born in hell, but hell was born because of that declaration. That is how hell came into being. There is only one real joy on earth and that is to live in Him, for Him and with Him, our dearest Lord.

Mary had a very clear idea of who she was—she was the Mother of the Messiah. If she needed to be told (and she didn’t really), Elizabeth had just told her she was the mother of the Lord who had made her. Mary also had no doubt by whose favor she was thus blessed. Compare the two phrases “lowliness of His handmaid” and “He who is mighty has done great things for me”. God the Almighty did great things for Mary precisely because in her own estimation she was only the lowly servant of the Lord. This is all that God asks of us; to tell Him, “You alone are mighty and I, except for you, am nothing.” That is the truth. I am indeed just the servant of the Lord.

In the second stanza, Mary tells us about her praise of the Almighty. God does not need our prayers nor do they add to His happiness, but He certainly wants them. He wants us to recognize Him for what He is. And according to Mary, He is power, He is holiness, and He is mercy.

How is God power? He is power because He can do whatever He wills. Perhaps the clearest and most painfully obvious sign of our being just creatures is the chasm that separates what we want and what we can do. Not God! He had only to will the world into existence, and it was made. He had only to will our souls into existence, and we were made. We exist only because God wills it. If He withdrew His willing, we would cease to be. In our day, when power is the watchword and the rulers of this world put so much fear into people’s hearts, we have to keep our balance. We must tell ourselves, “I am not impressed by human power, nor do I fear what any human being can do to me. The one I adore is also the only one I fear—the almighty one.” If we have the honesty and humility to acknowledge God’s greatness and our many limitations, we are safe. He alone has the right to tell us what to do, and then we do it. No wonder the saints were so powerful—they had Omnipotence at their disposal.

How is God holiness? He is holiness because He is the Wholly Other. He alone needs to exist. He alone must be; He alone cannot not be. Everything else, including ourselves, is unnecessary. We talk about growing in holiness, but what do we mean? We mean that we are to become more and more like God. And what is it that makes God holy? In the last theological analysis, it is the fact that God is utterly unworldly. He does not need the world and yet there wouldn't be a world without Him!

When God enlightens us it is always towards unworldliness. Look at what the world respects, what it considers great, what it honors and admires. An unworldly person is not preoccupied with the things of space and time but has his mind and heart on eternity. An unworldly person is not enamored of this world because he knows this world and all its vanity will soon pass away.

How is God Mercy? God is mercy because He loves the sinner even as He hates the sin. His mercy is boundless and His kindness towards the weak and fallen is proverbial. Yes, we have sinned often, perhaps deeply, but He still loves us. That word "still" is most consoling. God's love is greater than my sin. He wants us to become more holy just because we have sinned often, perhaps deeply, but He still loves us. We cannot explain that, but we must believe it. He wants our humility to increase as well as our patience and our prayerfulness.

There are many books and magazines that advise us not to be so conscious of our sins but rather to think of God's love. True enough, we can't think enough of His love for us, but not to think about our sins is nonsense. It is precisely that combination, divine love and our sins, that is the very definition of God's mercy. That is what mercy is. The Infinite Love of the Trinity from all eternity became divine mercy only when man had sinned and that love could exercise its benevolence, its forgiveness towards the sinner. To live in a real world, we must be constantly counterpoising God's love with our sinfulness. God's perfect manifestation of His love is His Mercy shown towards us sinners.

Now, in the third stanza of the Magnificat, Mary compares the proud person and the humble one. Mary tells us that, "He has scattered the proud." "He has put down the mighty." "He has exalted the lowly." "He has filled the hungry with good things." Mary goes on telling us these things, but it is really her Son, Jesus, Who is in her womb that is speaking to us through the lips of His mother.

God exalts the humble; He humbles the proud. But we often suppose that this reward of the humble and retribution of the proud takes place with regularity in this life. That is not so. Sadly, but obviously, the proud grow prouder day by day. They, the proud, are exalted. Who makes the headlines? Who is honored and praised in this world, and who is ignored? But no matter how long a human life may be, it is very short compared to eternity. That is why faith in heaven and hell is so strengthened as we recite the Magnificat prayer and are assured by Jesus, speaking through His mother, of what God eventually always does. Heaven is the glorification of humility, and hell is the humiliation of pride. Remember heaven and hell are both real!

Finally, Mary tells us that God keeps His promises. Reread the Old Testament. It tells of one disloyalty after another as the Jewish people refuse to live up to their covenant with Yahweh. Their constant relapsing into idolatry, their resistance to God's commands. Reread Jeremiah. What he calls the Jewish people is almost unprintable. And yet, after all their infidelity and disloyalty, after having murdered His prophets, ignored His laws and resisted His Will, there is nevertheless a covenant between Yahweh and His people. They had failed Him, but as Mary reminds us, God does not fail.

How we need God's reassurance. In spite of all of our past infidelities, He will not abandon us. He is a faithful God. He tells us not to become discouraged.

“Mother of Jesus and our mother, teach us your quiet peacefulness and your childlike confidence in your Son. Help us to trust Him, especially when things go wrong. Help us to believe in Him as you did, that the promises He makes to us He will always fulfill. Keep us from worry and sadness, Mother, so that we may always rejoice like you in God your Savior and ours, your beloved Son and our dearest Lord.”

## Chapter XVI

### THE LESSONS OF BETHLEHEM

If there is one event that changed the course of history, it is the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. In the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, the meditation on Bethlehem is called a contemplation on the Nativity. This means that the focus of the meditation is on the persons and events which took place at Bethlehem. But the purpose of these reflections is to apply their revealed meaning to our own spiritual life. That is why we are calling this conference the “Lessons of Bethlehem.”

#### POLITICAL POWER AND JESUS CHRIST

The first lesson that Bethlehem teaches us is the mysterious role that political power played in the life of Jesus Christ. As St. Luke tells us "a decree went forth from Caesar Augustus that a census of the whole world should be taken." Except for this decree of the Roman emperor, the Messianic prophecy of the Savior's birth in Bethlehem would never have been fulfilled. It was in obedience to the authority of a pagan monarch that Joseph went from Galilee out of the town of Nazareth into Judea to the town of David which is called Bethlehem. Why? Because he was of the house and family of David, to register together with Mary, his espoused wife, who was with child.

Just as Christ's birth at Bethlehem was occasioned by the imperial edict of a vain monarch, so Christ's death on Calvary was the result of a cowardly Pontius Pilate, representing the royal power of the Roman Empire.

The lesson behind Bethlehem and behind Calvary is the mysterious providence of unjust civil authority being used by God to accomplish the designs of God. God “uses” the sin of human beings to achieve His divine goals.

#### THE POVERTY OF THE INCARNATE GOD

The words of the Evangelist in describing what happened on Christmas morning could not be more simple. We are told that when the days for Mary to be delivered

were fulfilled, “she brought forth her first born Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes. She laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.”

Remember nothing ever “happens” with God. It was not coincidental that Mary and Joseph could not find lodging in Bethlehem. Nor was it by chance that our Lady gave birth to her Son in the stable and, literally wrapped Him in rags and laid Him in a trough.

What is Our Lord teaching us? He is telling us what lie enshrined in the first Beatitude when He declared, “Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.” Detachment from the things of this world is the first law in the following of Christ. This detachment is not a figure of speech. As the Infinite God, Christ possessed the universe as His domain. He chose to be born in a stable. He chose to come into the world, not only as man but as impoverished, and dependent and, by all human standards, helpless.

How we need this lesson today! In so-called developed countries like the United States, where wealth is glorified and poverty is despised, we need the inspiration that the Son of God gives us by His witness of destitution.

## **THE FIRST MESSAGE OF THE ANGEL TO THE SHEPHERDS**

The longest sustained part of the Bethlehem narrative is on the appearance of the angels to the shepherds “living in the same district and keeping watch over their flock by night. All of a sudden, an angel of the Lord stood by them while the glory of God shone around about them.” The Evangelist tells us “they feared exceedingly.”

The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be to all the people; for today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you, who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign to you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”

What were the shepherds being told? They were being told to identify a speechless babe lying in an animal barn with the Lord of the universe who had come to save a sinful world.

The lesson for us is too painfully obvious to miss. If poverty was the first instruction of Bethlehem, humility is its principal commandment. The Creator of the world by whose word the universe was made out of nothing came into the world as an *infans*, a speechless child. Later on, during His public ministry, Christ would give us one mandate, on which the whole of Christianity depends. “Learn of Me,” He declared, “I am meek and humble of heart.” Where pride wants to publicize itself, humility hides even the highest gifts we may possess. Humility, St. Teresa of Avila tells us, is the truth. Except for God, we would be what we were before He made us what we are—nothing. That is the truth.

No wonder the angel told the shepherds now this would be a sign to them that the Lord of heaven and earth would be found wrapped in castaway cloth and lying in a food bin for animals. Whatever else Bethlehem should teach us, it is the need for recognizing our sinful parading of self and our need for living a humiliated life.

## **THE ANGELIC PROMISE OF PEACE**

The first message of the single angel introduced a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.” The angels made two announcements through the shepherds to the human race.

The first announcement was to glorify God for the marvel of the Incarnation, now made visible by Christ's nativity. To glorify God means to recognize the goodness of God and adore Him for His gracious love in becoming one of us to restore our friendship with the Holy Trinity. How we need this lesson: to glorify the goodness of God in our own lives made manifest in countless ways every day of our lives.

The second announcement was to promise peace to human beings here on earth, on one condition: that we become men and women of good will. To be of good will, in the language of God, is to conform one's will to the Divine will. By now there must be a dozen translations in English of the official Latin text in St. Luke, which says "*et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.*" But there is only one translation that is authentic, the one just quoted above. God promises peace of heart to those whose hearts are united with His, or in less poetic terms, whose wills are

conformed to the loving will of the Almighty.

The lesson behind this promise is beyond price. Unlike what the world teaches us, there is no peace in doing our *own* will. There is no peace in choosing what we want. There is no peace in demanding that our desires be satisfied. There is peace only in doing God's will. There is peace only in doing what God wants. There is peace only in subordinating our desires to what we may call the desires of God for us whom He loves.

## **THE SHEPHERDS CAME AND BELIEVED**

Twice in two chapters St. Luke tells us that people went in haste. Mary went in haste to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth and the shepherds went with haste to visit the Christ-child. As St. Ambrose tells us, love is always in a hurry. Not surprisingly the shepherds found Mary and Joseph and the child laying in a manger, just as the angel had told them. What is most significant is what the Evangelist next tells us, that when the shepherds "had seen, they understood what had been told them concerning this child." What is most marvelous about this statement is the suddenness with which understanding by the mind followed the shepherds' seeing with their eyes. Why did they understand? Because their minds did not resist the revelation which God was giving them.

This is more than a lesson to us. It is at once a warning and a divine promise. The warning is that the Gospel which Christ came into the world to reveal must be accepted by the believing mind. As Christ warns us, "He who believes...shall be saved, but he who does not believe shall be condemned" (Mk. 16:16). As a person or a nation becomes more academically educated, the mind tends to become correspondingly more skeptical. We are tempted to measure our degree of faith by the degree of our agreement with what we are expected to believe. It is not enough to say that the shepherds believed what they saw when they saw the Christ-child because, well, they were shepherds. You know they were unlettered, unsophisticated and, we may say, illiterate men doing the menial work of tending sheep by night.

What we sophisticated modernists had better learn is that not all educated people are intelligent, and that not all intelligent people are educated. But more important, the shepherds teach us the hardest lesson for the human mind to grasp: that you

never stand in judgment on the wisdom of God. He chooses the simple people to confound the self-wise and those with humble mind to put proud intellects to shame.

We *are* to understand what we believe. But this understanding is conditioned on having a lowly estimate of one's own intelligence when confronted with the ocean of Divine Wisdom.

## **THE SHEPHERDS AS FIRST APOSTLES**

St. Luke gives us only one sentence but it is most revealing. He says, “all that heard marveled at the things told to them by the shepherds.” It was not for nothing that the first visit of the angel told the shepherds that he was bringing them “good news of great joy which shall be to all the people.” The “Good News” is of course the Gospel. After having seen the Christ-child and understood what this meant, they began to tell others about their experience. It must seem ironic that when God-become-man appeared in visible form on earth He should have resorted, of all people, to unlettered caretakers of sheep to communicate His message to the rest of the world.

Another embarrassing lesson for us. We have the true faith. We have received the message of salvation. We have in greater or less measure understood what we believe. Is there something still wanting to us? Yes, indeed! We have the duty to tell others what we know is God's revealed truth. We have the responsibility to share with others what God has so undeservingly given to us. We cannot excuse ourselves for not being in positions of influence in the Church or society. We cannot hide behind our anonymity. Each one of us, just because we have the true faith, has a corresponding duty to communicate this faith to everyone who, however minimally, touches our lives.

## **THE HEART OF MARY**

It should be no surprise that St. Luke does not quote a single word of Our Lady at Bethlehem. All the Evangelist says is that, “Mary kept in mind all these things, pondering them in her heart.” As the Virgin Most Prudent, we are not surprised that Our Lady gave no speeches at Bethlehem. What we are told is that she kept

all the events of Christmas morning on her mind while pondering them in the depths of her heart.

This is both the final and, in a way, the most important lesson of Bethlehem. God became man to dwell among us in the fullness of His human nature in the Holy Eucharist and the depth of supernatural gifts by His grace. Our most important task on earth is to think of Christ our Incarnate God by speaking to Him with our minds. And our deepest experience on earth is to tell our Lord that we love Him from the depths of our hearts. Everything else this side of eternity is secondary, for the best of reasons. To imitate Mary in her contemplative love at Bethlehem is already a foretaste of heaven on earth. It is also the promise of joining Our Lady in that everlasting Christmas day for which we were made.

## **PRAYER**

“Lord Jesus, Our God, you were born into this world at Bethlehem to teach us many things. But the deepest and hardest lesson we have to learn is to become like little children if we wish to possess the Kingdom of Heaven.

“Conquer our pride, dear Savior, humiliate our vanity to become something of what You became at Bethlehem--a little child. We trust You, ever. Lord, we love You with all our hearts. Make our hearts childlike like Thine.”

## Chapter XVII

### PRESENTATION AND PURIFICATION

St. Luke is the principal evangelist of Our Lady. After narrating the birth of Christ at Bethlehem, he tells us in one sentence what happened on the eighth day after Christmas. “When eight days were fulfilled for His circumcision, His name was called Jesus, the name given Him by the angel before He was conceived in the womb” (Luke 2:21). Circumcision was the divinely prescribed ceremony which every male Jewish believer was required to undergo as a sign of belonging to the Chosen People of Yahweh.

Then follow almost forty verses describing Christ’s presentation in the temple and His Mother’s purification. It is worth quoting the whole event in the words of the evangelist.

When the days of her purification were fulfilled according to the Law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord—as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”—and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

And behold, there was in Jerusalem a man named Simeon, and this man was just and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Christ of the Lord.

And he came by inspiration of the Spirit into the temple. And when his parents brought in the child Jesus to do for Him according to the custom of the Law, he also received him into his arms and blessed God saying: “Now thou dost dismiss thy servant, O Lord, according to thy word, in peace; Because my eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples: A light of revelation to the Gentiles, and a glory for thy people Israel.”

And His father and mother were marveling at the things spoken concerning Him. And Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this

child is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, and for a sign that shall be contradicted. And thy own soul a sword shall pierce, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

There was also Anna, a prophetess, daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her maidenhood, and by herself as a widow to eighty-four years. She never left the temple, with fastings and prayers worshipping night and day.

And coming up at that very hour, she began to give praise to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem (Lk 2:22-38).

Over the centuries, this event in the life of the infant Christ has been commented on in volumes of ecclesiastical writing. These commentaries can be divided into four classes: those reflecting on the purification of Our Lady; those concentrating on the presentation of her divine Son; those explaining the mysterious words of Simeon; and finally, those referring to Anna, the prophetess.

## **PURIFICATION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY**

The original Greek text of St. Luke’s Gospel has the phrase “their purification,” which can only mean “the purification of Mary and Jesus.” Two different laws of Moses were fulfilled on this occasion: the purification of the mother (Lev. 12) and the presentation of the firstborn son (Ex. 13:2, 12, 15). Following the common custom, St. Luke combines both rites under the name of “purification.” Again, it is a long quotation, and in fact covers one whole chapter in the book of Leviticus. However, given the importance of Our Lady’s purification, it should be quoted in full.

The Lord said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites: When a woman has conceived and gives birth to a boy, she shall be unclean for seven days, with the same uncleanness as at her menstrual period. On the eighth day, the flesh of the boy’s foreskin shall be circumcised, and then she shall spend thirty-three days more in becoming purified of her blood; she shall not touch anything sacred nor enter the sanctuary till the days of her purification are fulfilled. If she gives birth to a girl, for fourteen days she shall be as unclean as at her

menstruation, after which she shall spend sixty-six days in becoming purified of her blood.

When the days of her purification for a son or for a daughter are fulfilled, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the Meeting Tent a yearling lamb for a holocaust and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. The priest shall offer them up before the Lord to make atonement for her, and thus she will be clean again after her flow of blood. Such is the law for the woman who gives girth to a boy or a girl child. If, however, she cannot afford a lamb, she may take two turtledoves or two pigeons, the one for a holocaust and the other for a sin offering. The priest shall make atonement for her, and thus she will again be clean.”

Among the pagan religions of the Old Testament, the origin of life was attributed to some mysterious power acting on women. Generation was therefore always looked upon with superstitious awe and women after childbirth were tabooed all the world over.

But the Jewish law had a deep religious significance. It recognized God as the source of life, and therefore a holocaust was to be offered Him in recognition of the origin of a new life from Him. The sin-offering did not imply that childbirth or conjugal intercourse were considered sinful. Rather after childbirth she was considered ceremonially unclean and atonement had to be made by an offering.

Where the child born was a girl, the period of purification lasted forty days. Two explanations have been given. According to one, it was considered physiologically more dangerous for the girl's mother and therefore required a longer period of convalescence. According to another opinion, since woman was the first to bring sin into the world, the birth of a female child should impose on her mother a longer period of seclusion.

Needless to say, the Blessed Virgin Mary required no purification. As one who had been Immaculately conceived and filled with the grace of God, she did not have to be purified either morally or ritually. Yet in God's providence she underwent the rite of purification to cooperate with her divine Son who underwent His passion and death as a reputed criminal, to expiate the sins of the world.

Jewish law provided two kinds of holocausts for the purification: either a lamb and a pigeon, or a turtledove. If the mother was poor, she was allowed to bring two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for the holocaust and the other as a sin-offering. The Virgin Mary offered the sacrifice allowed for a poor woman.

The feast in honor of Our Lady's Purification was introduced into the Roman Empire during the reign of emperor Justinian (527-565). It is mentioned in the Gelasian Sacramentary for the Western Church in the seventh century. In the West, the feast of the Purification of Our Lady became the feast of the Presentation of the Lord in 1970.

## **PRESENTATION OF JESUS**

As the fourth of the joyful mysteries of the Rosary, I do not think we can do better than to quote verbatim the meditation of Pope John XXIII on the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. The quotation is not too long, it will be followed by a short explanation. Says the Holy Father:

Jesus, carried in his mother's arms, is offered to the priest, to whom he holds out his arms: it is the meeting, the contact of the two Covenants. He is already the 'light for revelation to the Gentiles' (Luke 2:32) he, the splendour of the chosen people, the son of Mary. St. Joseph also is there to present him, an equal sharer in this rite of legal offerings according to the law.

This episode is continually repeated in the Church, indeed is perpetuated there in forms which vary but are similar in the substance of the offering. As we repeat the Hail Marys, how beautiful it is to contemplate the growing crops, the rising corn: 'Lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for the harvest' (John 4:35). These are the joyful and rising hopes of the priesthood, and of those men and women who co-operate with the priests, so numerous in the kingdom of God and yet never enough: young people in the seminaries, in religious houses, in missionary training colleges, also, and why not? Are they not Christians also, called likewise to be apostles? – in the Catholic universities. There are also all the other young shoots of the future and indispensable apostolate of the laity,

this apostolate which, increasing in spite of difficulties and opposition, even within nations tormented by persecution, offers and will never cease to offer such a consoling spectacle as to compel expressions of admiration and joy.<sup>30</sup>

These reflections of Pope John XXIII are, to say the least unexpected. How does he associate the Presentation of Christ in the Temple with the bright prospects for the Church which he foresaw when he summoned the Second Vatican Council? He had no illusions about the pending crisis in Christianity throughout the world. In fact he summoned the Council precisely to reform the Catholic Church.

Yet he saw in Christ's Presentation in the Temple a sign of the Church's future in the centuries to come. This young Child, just forty days old, was to change the history of the world. His mother presented Him to His heavenly Father in anticipation of the sufferings He would undergo, finally terminating in His crucifixion on Calvary.

The key to understanding the mystery of Christ's presentation is to see, in God's providence, the marvels He performs provided we offer ourselves completely to His divine will. Mary made the offering of her Son as she held Him in her arms at the Presentation. He was offering Himself, already in infancy, as the prelude to the offering He would continue making until He expired on Calvary.

### **THE *NUNC DIMITTIS***

The hymn of Simeon, commonly known as the *Nunc Dimittis* from the first words of his Latin translation, has been used in the Church since the earliest times. It is part of the liturgical night prayers, commonly known as *Compline*. It is worth repeating this hymn: "Now thou dost dismiss thy servant, O Lord, according to thy word, in peace; Because my eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples: A light of revelation to the Gentiles, and a glory for thy people of Israel."

A man after the type of Zachary and Elizabeth, aged, pious, Simeon was looking for the fulfillment of God's promises in the true spirit of the Old Testament. As St. Luke never tires pointing out, such people are under the special influence of the Holy Spirit, and through that influence it was Simeon's privilege to welcome the

Lord to his temple (Mal 3:1) and to acknowledge Jesus as the promised Messiah.

What is Simeon telling us? He is saying that his life on earth has been fulfilled. He will die in peace because with the eyes of faith he has seen the Savior foretold by the prophets. This Savior has come into the world for the redemption of the whole human race. He is at once the glory of the chosen people of Israel, and the light of revelation with the Gentiles.

How much we can learn from Simeon. All that he saw in Mary's arms was a helpless and speechless babe. But, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, he saw with the eyes of his mind no one less than the living God, who, having joy set before Him chose to become man and die on the cross.

However Simeon, was not finished. He still had a message for the mother of Jesus. Inspired from on high, he told Mary that this child of hers was destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign that would be contradicted. No wonder, speaking directly to Our Lady, he told her her own soul shall be pierced by the sword, so that the thoughts of many hearts would be revealed.

There is no single prophesy in the Old Testament which compares in depth with these words of the aged Simeon.

Over the twenty centuries since the birth of Christ, He has been literally, and I mean literally, the light of revelation to the Gentiles. Who else except Jesus Christ has continued for two thousand years to keep telling the world that only by listening to Him will the human race know the truth and only by following Him can we reach our eternal destiny.

Then follows the mysterious prediction of how the world would respond to its Savior. Some would accept Him, others would reject Him. In the most precise sense of our human language, Christ has been a sign of contradiction. We might almost divide the story of mankind into two categories, those who accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior and those who reject Him as a fraud and misleader.

The writings of Karl Marx and his disciple Engels are filled with blasphemous denunciations of Christ and Christianity. Writes Engels, "Christianity knew only one point in which all men were equal: that all were equally born in original sin- which corresponded perfectly with its character as a religion of the slaves and the

oppressed”<sup>31</sup> Is it any wonder that for seventy years in Russia, to be a Christian was to be a martyr, either dying a martyr’s death or surviving in a martyr’s life.

For thirteen hundred years, most of the martyrs of Christianity have been victims of Islam. Mohammed could not be more clear, “Jesus in Allah’s eyes is the same position as Adam. He created him of dust and said to him, ‘Be,’ and he is.” In an eloquent passage, Mohammed consigns all Christians to eternal doom. He declares, “they surely disbelieve who say, ‘Behold, Allah is the messiah, son of Mary.’ The Messiah himself said, ‘Children of Israel, worship Allah my Lord and your God.’ Whoever ascribes partners unto Allah, for him Allah has forbidden Paradise. His abode is the Fire. For evil doers there will be no relief” (*Koran*, Sura V, 72).

Let us be clear. What Simeon foretold at Christ’s presentation has been literally fulfilled for two millennia and will continue being fulfilled until the end of time.

Simeon had one more sentence, directed to Mary. He prophesied that a sword would pierce her soul, so that the thoughts of many hearts might be revealed. The artists of Christianity have depicted Our Lady with her heart pierced by a sword. No less than her Son was pierced with a soldier’s lance, so was the heart of His mother pierced by a sword. He underwent His passion; she underwent her compassion. She suffered with Him in spirit.

The lesson for us is obvious. The more truly we love Jesus Christ the more closely we identify ourselves with His mother. Our love for Him, like hers, must be proved by joining with Him in carrying our cross because we love Him.

## **THE PROPHETESS ANNA**

Like Simeon there was a devoted woman in the temple, fast in praying night and day. In God’s providence, she came upon the scene just as the Savior was being presented to the Father. Like Simeon she too recognized the Infant in Mary’s arms as the Messiah foretold by the prophets.

No less than the shepherds on Christmas morning, Anna believed and told everyone whom she met that the Redeemer of the world was born. Not coincidentally, the evangelist explains that she “spoke of Him to all who were

awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.” Only those who believed were told about the Messiah having come into the world.

## Chapter XVIII

### THE VISITATION OF THE MAGI

St. Matthew is the only evangelist who gives us the full details of the visit of the Magi to the Christ child. Once again, the full quotation is lengthy but it is worth giving in full. There are so many implications for our faith and spiritual life that we should hear all the twelve verses of the evangelist describing the Magi’s visit to Bethlehem.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, Magi came from the East to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him.’ But when King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and so was all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and Scribes of the People, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, ‘in Bethlehem of Judea; for thus it is written by the prophet, *And thou, Bethlehem, of the land of Juda, art by no means least among the princes of Juda; for from thee shall come forth a leader who shall rule my people Israel.*’

Then Herod summoned the Magi secretly, and carefully ascertained from them the time when the star had appeared to them. And sending them to Bethlehem, he said, ‘Go and make careful inquiry concerning the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and worship him.’

Now they, having heard the king, went their way. And behold, the star that they had seen in the East went before them, until it came and stood over the place where the child was. And when they saw the star they rejoiced exceedingly. And entering the house they found the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they worshipped him. And opening their treasures they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return

to Herod, they went back to their own country by another way.  
(Matthew 2:1-12)

The profane Greek word *magos* has four different meanings. It can be a member of the Persian priestly caste, one who possesses occult knowledge or power, a magician or a charlatan. Christian tradition identifies the Magi as specially gifted Orientals who had the ability to understand the secret powers of nature. One thing is certain, they were not magicians or astrologers. From the sixth century of the Christian era, they were identified as kings. The basis for this belief is the prophesy of the psalmist who foretold, "The kings of Tharsis and the islands shall offer gifts, the kings of Arabia and Saba shall pay tribute. All the kings of the earth shall adore him" (Ps. 72:10).

Over the centuries there have been many speculations as to what kind of luminous body appeared in the sky which inspired the Magi to come to Bethlehem. After all the speculations are examined, we may safely say that the star which the Magi saw was a miraculous intervention by God. Among the Jews, the coming of the Messiah was the fulfillment of Balaam's prophesy "a star rises out of Jacob and a scepter is lifted up from Israel" (Numbers 24:17).

What is most remarkable is that when the Magi came to Jerusalem, their arrival stirred up the whole city. King Herod was terrified when his agents warned him of these strangers from the East who were looking for another king of the Jews. By then Herod had escaped so many plots against his life that he had reason to fear. Was this a new secret rival? That is why he summoned all the princes of the priests the guardians of Jewish tradition and the Scribes, who were the authorized interpreters of Scripture. He asked them where was the expected Messiah to be born? They all replied it was in Bethlehem of Juda. As the original Hebrew foretells, "And you, Bethlehem, Ephrata, little among the clans of Juda, from you shall come forth to me the one who shall rule over Israel" (Micah 5:2).

Once Herod learned that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, he summoned the Magi and dismissed them. Then, deceiver that he was, he told them to strive earnestly to find the child and when they had found Him to return to Herod so that he too could worship the Promised One of Israel.

Once more the star they had seen in the East appeared before them. It stopped exactly where the child was. The literal translation of the evangelist tells us that,

“They found the child with Mary His mother, and falling on their knees they adored Him. Then they opened their treasures and offered Him their gifts, gold, incense and myrrh” (Matthew 2:9-10).

It may seem strange to us Western people that the Magi brought gifts for the Christ child. But the Oriental custom was and is to never pay a visit to a superior without offering gifts. They brought what was then considered the most precious products of their country. Incense and myrrh were then the principal products of Arabia. Gold also was abundant among them. Strange to say it could then be exchanged at ridiculous prices.

There is a profound symbolism behind the gifts which the Magi brought. One ancient ecclesiastical writer says, “they offered gold, incense and myrrh to Christ the king, their God, and man.” St. Irenaeus explains, “they offered to Him who is to die, gold to Him whose kingdom will never end, incense to the God of the Jews who is now manifesting Himself to the Gentiles.”

King Herod had hoped to deceive the Magi. Nothing would have prevented him from ridding himself of a rival, even if this rival was the Messiah foretold by the prophets. The idea of a general massacre of all the newborn children around Bethlehem was not foreign to his treachery. But he hoped to avoid a slaughter if he could find and kill the one Child who threatened his royalty.

We know what happened. Before the Magi went back to Jerusalem, as Herod had asked them to, they were warned by an angel to return to their home country by another route. As a result, the life of the Christ child was saved, but only because another angel told Joseph to take Mary and her son and fly immediately to Egypt. The Holy Family remained in Egypt until the death of King Herod.

So far we have seen something of the remarkable event that we now commemorate on the feast of the Epiphany. Volumes have been written on the implications of the visit of the Magi to the newborn infant who came into the world to redeem a fallen human race.

There are two lessons that the visit of the Magi are meant to teach us. The first is that, by their coming to visit the Christ child they revealed God’s plan of salvation, to include not only the chosen people of Israel but the whole of mankind, including the Gentiles. The second lesson is the hard one. No sooner was Christ born, than

the civil power vested in King Herod sought to destroy Christianity at its very beginnings. This has been the pattern of Christian history for twenty centuries.

## **THE MAGI SYMBOLIZE THE GENTILES**

All that we know from the Old Testament, tells us that the Jewish people were chosen by Yahweh to be the heralds of God's revealed truth to the whole world. From Abraham on, the prophets foretold how the Jewish nation would spread to the far ends of the earth. When the Messiah came, they would proclaim His teaching to the rest of the world.

As we know, most of the Jewish people left Palestine and moved to as far as northern Scotland and South Africa by the seventh century before Christ. Called the Jews of the diaspora, they were to remain faithful to the heritage they had received from the patriarchs and prophets. They were to remain faithful to the one true God and, when the Messiah came, they were to spread His message of salvation to the far ends of the globe.

But we also know what happened. In one century after another, the Chosen People became unfaithful to their marvelous heritage. As a result, they were taken over by hostile nations like the Assyrians and Babylonians, like the Egyptians and finally the Romans. Their years of captivity by these pagan overlords was God's way of waking them up to their exalted dignity.

The last captivity of the Jewish people was under the Romans. It was in this situation that the Messiah came into the world. The very fact that He was born in Bethlehem was because the Roman emperor Augustus decreed that everyone was to go to his place of origin to be registered. Shrewdly the Romans allowed the Jews to keep their political sovereignty intact, but in name only. Herod was a king, but only with a nominal royalty.

The coming of the Magi was also the evening of the Jewish people. Their centuries of disloyalty to the laws given to them by God through Moses and the prophets was now to be repaid by divine justice.

It is not only that Herod, the nominal king of the Jews, sought to destroy what he considered his rival. It was the divine revelation of the beginning of a new era in

revealed history. The Magi represented the rest of the human race for whom God became Incarnate and was born as a speechless child in Bethlehem. A generation later, St. Paul would try to convert his own people to accept Jesus as the Messiah. A handful accepted Jesus Christ. But the majority refused to believe. St. Paul therefore, under divine inspiration, decided to turn to the Gentiles. Their openness to Christ's teaching was nothing less than miraculous. By the end of the first century of Christianity, there were over one hundred dioceses along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

## **HEROD SYMBOLIZES THE STATE**

The deepest meaning of the visit of the Magi has yet to be seen. Coming from the Gentile world, in search of the king of the Jews, they naturally went to the palace of King Herod to find out where the new monarch of the Jewish people was born. Of course the Magi came to Herod in good faith. It was not only a star in the heavens but nothing less than a special, even mystical inspiration which led them to Palestine in search of the Messiah.

Little did they know what fear they inspired in Herod's heart when he heard that a new king of the Jews had come into the world. They were told to go to Bethlehem. But remember, Herod himself had to ask the Jewish leaders where the Messiah was to be born. He did not know. In fact, he did not want to know. When the priests and scribes told him that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, you would expect them to be the first ones to go to Bethlehem and discover this infant whom the prophets had foretold.

Herod's reaction to the information he received about the place where the Messiah was to be born is nothing less than a profound mystery. From Herod on until Good Friday, the story of Jesus Christ was the same. The political powers in what we have come to call the Holy Land were in open opposition to the Savior of the world.

No sooner did Christ come into the world than He had to be taken out of Palestine, in the dead of night, to escape the murderous envy of the tyrant Herod.

When Herod died, Jesus returned to where He had been conceived at Nazareth. We commonly speak of His thirty years of hidden life at Nazareth. Not so. It was

not a hidden life but a life in hiding. Christ had to remain in secret seclusion for three decades in order to avoid the envious hatred from a hostile political power.

No sooner did Jesus begin His public ministry than He aroused the hostility of the leaders of the Chosen People. They allowed Him less than three years to proclaim His message of salvation during what we call His public ministry. The very miracles that He performed were the last straw. No sooner did He raise the dead Lazarus from the grave than the Scribes and Pharisees decided on appealing to the State to have the Author of life crucified.

What happened at Christ's birth has been going on for the past twenty centuries. It will continue during all the centuries of Christian history until the end of time.

Our own country is a tragic example of what this means. We commonly, but erroneously, speak of separation of Church and State in America. Not really. It is rather subordination of Church to State. The interests of the State are paramount, and the Church dare not compete with these interests at the risk of being opposed and, if necessary, being destroyed by the State.

As the State successfully pursues its aims, it cannot on principle allow the Catholic Church to threaten its political supremacy.

Again as the State becomes more secularized, that is more worldly, it considers the Catholic Church to be its greatest threat. Why? Because the Church believes that human beings exist indeed in this world but their destiny is in a heavenly eternity in union with God.

In the defense of its secular interests, the State feels compelled to resist what it considers rival competitors, by ignoring their interests, by dulling their influence and, if necessary suppressing their rights. Among these competitors in our country, the Catholic Church is considered the arch-rival of the secularized State.

The State can achieve this result, either directly by executive mandate, by restrictive legislation or judicial decision; or indirectly by encouraging such domestic rivalry within the Catholic Church as to weaken if not erase her effective impact on the State.

So the litany of subordination of Church to State goes on. It all began with the visit of the Magi to the Christ child in Bethlehem. It reached its climax during Christ's visible stay on earth when Pilate condemned the Savior to a merciless death on Calvary. It is going on in one nation after another, including our own beloved United States.

Just one closing observation. Nothing ever happened in the life of Christ during His visible stay on earth that was not meant for all times. Epiphany means "manifestation." The first Epiphany was the manifestation of how Jesus Christ had to escape to Egypt to keep from being murdered by Herod. To this day, the Epiphany manifests how the followers of Christ are treated by those who wield political power in opposition to the teachings of Christ.

## **Chapter XIX**

### **JESUS FOUND IN THE TEMPLE**

Our present reflection is on the Gospel is on Christ being found in the temple, is recorded in the Gospel according to St. Luke. We could substitute the subtitle: “Virgin, most faithful.”

There are two dramatic occasions in the Gospels when we are told, both times by St. Luke, that Mary did not say anything, but simply reflected on the mysterious designs of God and pondered on His providence in her heart. The first occasion was when the shepherds visited the Christ-child in Bethlehem and told Mary and Joseph all they had seen and heard. Mary is then said to have kept in mind all these words, pondering them in her heart. The second occasion was after she and Joseph had found Christ at the age of twelve in the temple and Jesus had just told his mother that He must be about His Father’s business, which is the only correct translation of the Greek. Again, Mary is said to have kept all these things carefully in her heart.

Our reflection on this second occasion, is on the last time that the veil of mystery is raised on the life of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph for the next eighteen years; only to be lifted when Christ began his public ministry. This is also the fifth of the joyful mysteries of the Rosary, that by now has been recited and dwelt upon millions of times. It deserves at least a few minutes prayerful consideration. It is the only episode recorded by the evangelists after the infancy narratives and before the account of Christ’s public life. The only events, just a few verses long in almost thirty years. It gives us an incite into how God’s providence deals with persons that He loves. It finally tells us how, like Mary, we should dispose ourselves to respond to God’s mysterious ways in our lives. In fact, in the life of the whole people of God. In each case, a brief subheading and then a few words of reflection.

### **GOD TRIES THOSE HE LOVES**

Whatever else we should know about God’s dealing with souls, we must make sure that He tries those He loves. You might say He loves every human being, so He

does, so He tries everybody. That is easy. But the degree that He is trying depends on two other things. It depends on the level of sanctity to which He wants to raise a soul; and also on the work He wants that soul to do in the extension of His kingdom. This is so true that the higher our call to holiness and the greater the work in the apostolate to which God calls us, the greater will be His trying us. Humanly speaking, the more unsolicited will be the trials and difficulties and obstacles God is sure to send us. Think for a moment about such a person as St. Paul. Fortunately, he has left us something of a record of what he underwent. It is not a very long apostolic enterprise. Many of his letters were written in prison. At least on one dramatic occasion, they were written while he was in chains. Scourged, stoned, left for dead, betrayed, friends lost, hated, and added to all of this the interior sufferings that he experienced. Think of a Teresa of Avila or a Catherine of Siena or a Clare of Assisi, along with all the great founders of religious institutes, like Francis, and Dominic and Ignatius of Loyola. In fact, in the process of canonization, one of the indispensable conditions the Church looks for in people that she is even beginning to consider as possibly, having practiced heroic virtues is rather that person has undergone severe trials. He or she may in deed have been very holy. That is for God to judge. But as far as the Church is concerned, unless that person had endured extraordinary trials, difficulties, and obstacles, the process of canonization is closed. The Church does not even bother with further investigation. Interesting but revealing.

All of this is under the inspiration of God, to make sure that when we wish to identify with those whom the Church raises to the honor of the altar, there will be no mistake. We will be sure to say what they understood, they were tried too.

We return to the event of the finding in the temple, that we might just as well call the losing in the temple. Christ did not have to do what He did. He need not have stayed on in the temple in the first place. Once He had decided to do so, He could have stayed on but simply told Mary and Joseph, "I have work to do." But that is exactly the point. God does not generally tell us what He is going to do. He just does it. Then He lets us try to figure it out for ourselves. He will put illness into our lives. Or He will take loving persons out of our lives.

I will never forget, John Chrysostom Chang, the Chinese Jesuit with whom I studied in Rome. We became fast friends. He finished his dissertation before I did and was immediately told by the Jesuit general to pack up and go to Communist China. How I envied him. "John," I said, "how fortunate you are."

Five years later I found out he was awaiting execution. Lucky man. The wonderful people that God puts into our lives, kind people, understanding people, or maybe just the perfect compliment to our personality. He likes to talk and she likes to listen. Perfect. Or I am willing to listen, and she cannot stop talking. But as sure as there is a God in heaven, He never puts wonderful things into our lives be they people or situations, leave it to God, without in His own way, taking them away. Job is the model for mankind. No matter. This is the way God acts and the first lesson in the mystery of the finding of the temple should teach us is that God's ways are not our ways.

Second reflection. God has a purpose in everything He does. We might ask why does God act in this way? Why exactly did Christ do what He did, as described by the evangelist who was told all of this we are sure, by Mary herself. No one except God knows the full answer. But one thing we do know. The purpose that God has in thus trying His loved ones is not to see them suffer. His purpose is always good and His designs are always just, even more, they are supremely loving and kind. What might be some of these designs of God in allowing us to suffer?

There are only two mysteries in the universe. One in heaven, that is the Trinity, one on earth and that is pain. All the literature of all nations has been struggling to explain God and human suffering.

What might be some of the reasons? In this way, God evokes from us the deepest resources of our faith; suffering and trial, especially interior trial calls upon our faith in God's goodness as nothing else in life. It is so easy to recite the Apostles' or Nicene Creed. And when we are in the mood and the congregation has the spirit we thrill to sing out *Credo in unum deum*. But there is no melody, and no great pleasure in singing "I believe," when God is bidding me to accept what I do not understand. Make sure we know, where the emphasis should be placed: "I do not understand." But you know the essence of faith is trusting that *God* understands. Again in this way, God evokes from us, the highest reaches of our love. When do we love God the most? Is it not when we love Him for His own sake and not for ours? What cheap words. It is bringing these words into action. It is making them alive that matters. This is what trial and testing and temptation are to produce in the humble soul, bent only on doing the will of God. When we tell Him and we mean it, "Lord the only satisfaction I get, the only joy in my heart is the realization I am doing what you want because quite frankly, I do not want it." But I do it.

That is the definition of perfect love of God. In this way God teaches us that He is Master of the universe, that He alone is Lord. How we need this reminder. We are so proud that we want God to conform to our plans. And then people write learned books to prove that what they want is what God wants, instead of adjusting their hearts to the heart of God, their minds to His, their wills to His mysterious and most demanding divine will.

Moreover, and with emphasis, how often I have told myself this, as I have been telling my students over the years, the deepest understanding of our faith will not come from books. It will come from experience and prayer. The kingdom of Christ is most effectively promoted and the grace of God is most abundantly poured out on the souls of those who have learned the meaning of the apostolate of suffering.

Back in the early third century, when persecutions besieged the Church of God, she coined the expression that we should memorize, most of us have heard it. Let us cherish it. Pardon the Latin first. *Sanguis martyrum, semen Christianorum*. “The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians.” The Church most thrives on the blood of her martyrs. It is not easy to accept this principle of propagation, that the Church prospers on the sufferings of her faithful. I know. I have listened to too many people. I have seen too many people, writhing, struggling with the mystery of God. There is only one answer, only one, complete abandonment to the will of God; I do not have to understand. “In fact, precisely because I do not understand, that is why no matter how much your loving hand tries me, what I endure will be that much more effective in winning souls back to you my Lord, from whom they have strayed.”

## **MARY’S LESSON TO ALL OF US**

One of the striking features of Mary’s life as told especially by the evangelist, St. Luke, is the frequent entrance of God into her life to make demands of her. She was, humanly speaking, unprepared. This was true at the Annunciation. To say the least she was surprised. On being told about Elizabeth, the last thing Mary expected was to trek across the hill country of Judea to visit the aged kinswoman who was with child. During Joseph’s long quandary, she was never told to tell him how she conceived the child she was carrying. And so she suffered the humiliation that prompted Joseph to put her away. One of the most painful experiences in life

is to think that someone we love thinks something evil about us. At the sudden move from Nazareth to Bethlehem, at the rejection by the innkeepers in Bethlehem, at the birth of her Son in a stable, at the prophesy of Simeon, at the flight into Egypt, and now at the loss of her child in the temple, but most of all at His strange words to her, “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s affairs?” Did she comprehend? Did she fully understand why? No!

This is where Mary the Virgin most faithful is such a pattern for all of us to follow. She was most faithful, twice over, because, unlike her Son who had the constant vision of God, she had to live by faith. She did not see. But her faith was deep. It was strong.

So we pray, “Virgin most faithful, your faith was tried. Believing, you did not comprehend.”

None of us comprehends the designs of God in our lives. Long vigils in prayer, asceticism, mortification. All these are part of the road to sanctity. But let me tell you, your most important duty is to be interiorly resigned to God’s visitations in your life. Then, no matter what you may think of yourself, I can tell you, you are close to God.

If we do not fully understand, neither did Mary. That did not mean that she adjusted her actions to her lack of comprehension. Neither should we. We are to accept God’s providence every day, and for some of us, a large part of the day. We are to accept God’s visitations, we are to do what He evidently expects of us and surrender what He clearly wants us to give up. Not for a moment should we hold back because we do not comprehend.

I would like to close this reflection with a short prayer addressed to the provident of God. It was written by my Jesuit confrere, St. Claude Colombiere, the confessor and spiritual director of St. Margaret Mary.

“Loving and tender providence of my God, into your hands I commend my spirit, to you I abandon my hopes and fears, my desires and repugnancies, my temporal and eternal prospects. To you I commit the wants of my perishable body. To you I commit the most precious interests of my immortal soul, for whose lot I have nothing to fear as long as I do not leave your care. Though my faults are many, my misery great, my spiritual poverty extreme, my hope in you surpasses everything.

It is superior to my weakness, greater than my difficulties, stronger than death, though temptations should assail me, I will hope in you. Though I break my resolutions, I confidently rely on your grace to keep them at last; though you should kill me, even then I will trust in you for you are my Father, my God the support of my salvation. You are my kind compassionate and indulgent parent and I am your devoted child who casts myself into your arms and beg your blessing, I put my trust in you and so trusting shall not be confounded. Amen.”

## **Chapter XX.**

### **BAPTISM OF JESUS**

#### Introduction

- 1) With this meditation, we begin the public life of Jesus Christ.
- 2) We call it the public life to distinguish the 30 years of Christ’s hidden life at Nazareth.
- 3) We also call it the public life because it represents Christ’s reaching out to the world publicly.
- 4) Our Purpose in the next three meditations will be to prayerfully consider:
  - 1) The Baptism of Jesus by John.
  - 2) Christ’s temptation in the desert.
  - 3) Christ’s first public manifestation of Himself at His native city of Nazareth.

#### Analysis

### **Baptism Of Jesus**

## Introduction

- 1) The Baptism of our Lord introduces His public ministry.
- 2) John the Baptist figures very prominently in the Gospels. He is the last of the prophets of the Old Testament and the first of the prophets in the New Testament.
- 3) Significantly he is called:
  - The precursor of Christ.
  - The forerunner of Christ.
- 4) Significantly too John the Baptist was conceived before Jesus:
  - The same angel Gabriel...
  - He was visited by Our Lady...
  - He was sanctified...
  - At his birth, his father Zachary pronounced the *Benedictus* that we say in our morning prayer of the Divine Office.

In this prayer Zachary says of his son, “And you child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High , for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give His people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins...” (Luke 1:76-77).

This was the role of John the Baptist, to open the eyes of the people to Their sins so that, repenting of their sins, they might recognize Jesus as The Messiah who had come to redeem the world.

- 5) Our scope of this meditation, we will reflect on:
  - 1) John the Baptist announcing the coming of Christ.
  - 2) The Baptism of Christ as Christ’s voluntary humiliation.
  - 3) Baptism of Christ as the announcement of His Divinity.

As we go through each of three stages, we shall reflect on the practical implications in our lives.

## **John the Baptist Announces Jesus**

- 1) John the Baptist had been reprimanding, especially the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were coming to his Baptism. He said to them  
“Brood of vipers! Who has shown you how to flee from the wrath to come?  
Bring forth therefore fruit befitting repentance,  
And do not think to say within yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that God is able out of these stones to raise up children to Abraham.  
For even now the axe is laid at the root of the tree; every tree therefore that is not bringing forth good fruit is to be “cut down and thrown into the fire.”
- 2) After castigating the Pharisees and Sadducees:
  - The Pharisees for their hypocrisy.
  - The Sadducees for their disbelief in the Baptist’s announcing of the coming of Christ.

“He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to bear. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and will gather His wheat into the barn; but the chaff He will burn up with unquenchable fire.”

- 3) All of this was more than a prelude to Christ’s Baptism. It was the necessary preparation of the people to:
  - Believe in Christ as the Redeemer
  - Repent of sins in order to recognize Jesus as indeed the Messiah.

## **Christ’s Baptism and Humility**

- 1) As described by St. Matthew we are told:  
Then Jesus came from Galilee to John,  
At the Jordan, to be baptized by Him.  
And John was for hindering Him, and  
said, “It is I who ought to be baptized by  
thee, and dost thou come to me?”  
But Jesus answered and said to him, “Let

it be so now, for so it becomes us to fulfill all justice.” Then he permitted him.

- 2) The meaning of Christ’s Baptism by John takes meaning only from two facts that:
  - John’s Baptism was the external confession of being a sinner.
  - Jesus was not a sinner.
- 3) John protested about Baptizing Jesus. He knew, already from childhood, who Jesus was.
  - John’s mother told Mary that she, Elizabeth, was not worthy to have the Mother of my Lord to come visit me.
  - John had been sanctified, in his mother’s womb, when Mary, carrying Jesus in her womb, greeted Elizabeth.
  - John had to have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit all through his life on the fact that Jesus was not only the Messiah but the Son of the Most High.

#### Analysis

- 1) John therefore strongly pleaded, not to baptize Jesus. But Jesus insisted. Why?
  - Because Jesus was beginning His public mission of redeeming a sinful world.
  - Because Jesus wanted to be humiliated.
  - Because Jesus wanted to symbolize His mission of Savior of sinners.
    - . In the Jordan by being associated with sinners.
    - . On Calvary by being crucified between two criminals.
- 2) The lessons for us are beyond counting:
  - We are so naturally concerned about what other people think of us.
  - We are so fearful of being thought less of by others.
  - We are so fearful of being demeaned in the sight of others.
  - We are so dreadfully afraid of being humiliated and will resort to all sorts of schemes to avoid humiliation.
- 3) Yet, here is the all Holy God choosing to be humiliated
  - To teach us the value of humility

- To redeem us, especially from our sins of pride.

## **Announcement of Christ's Divinity**

1) The evangelist, St. Matthew, tells us, that something remarkable happened at the Jordan:

And when Jesus had been baptized, He immediately came up from the water. And behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and coming upon Him.

And behold, a voice from the heavens said, 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.'

2) This is the first public announcement of Christ's Divinity as the Second Person of the Trinity.

What happened?

- The heavens were opened.
- The Holy Spirit descended as a dove upon Jesus.
- A voice from heaven was heard.
- The Heavenly Father was well pleased with His Son Incarnate.
- The key to this revelation is the fact that Jesus was identified as the living God.
- The implications for us are fundamental to everything in our faith in Christ.

Analysis

- 1) It is Christ's Divinity that is the cardinal mystery that we are to believe.
- 2) Everything else in our life depends on this.
- 3) Christ's Divinity is the bases for our obedience to Jesus' commands.
- 4) Christ's Divinity is the basis for our love of Him, who is our God, who for love of us became man.

## **Chapter XXI**

### **TEMPTATION OF CHRIST BY THE DEVIL**

All the first three evangelists give us a narrative of Christ's temptation by the devil. There are only slight variations from the Gospel of St. Matthew, whose account of Christ's temptation is the longest and most detailed narrative that we have.

I want to call this a meditation. The reason is because Christ's experience in being tempted by the evil spirit is meant to be a basic lesson in our own spiritual lives. Since the Son of God allowed Himself to be tempted at the beginning of His public ministry, what should we expect? Nothing less than to be tempted in our own lives by the spirit of evil whose purpose is to lead us into sin.

The three basic questions that we ask ourselves will be slightly changed in this reflection. We will ask first why Jesus was tempted by the devil in the first place. Then we shall reflect on each of the three temptations of the Savior. And finally how are we to benefit from understanding these three successive temptations of Christ by the evil spirit. After all, everything in the life of Christ was meant to teach us how we are to follow Jesus Christ. We better understand how we are to cope with the temptations in our lives and thus become more Christ-like, following the example of the Savior.

#### **WHY WAS CHRIST TEMPTED?**

We begin by making a basic observation. Christ did not have to be tempted by the devil. He was the living God who voluntarily chose to become man. But even as man, Christ was absolutely sinless. He not only did not sin, He could not sin. He was, and is, the all holy God Incarnate. Unlike us, in His human nature, He had no concupiscence or unruly desires as we have. He could not have been tempted as we certainly are, by a fallen sin-prone human nature.

Moreover, Christ as the God-man could not have sinned. This would have been a contradiction to His Incarnation. Consequently the very word "temptation" in Christ's case is misleading, as though He might have been swayed into committing sin.

We are tempted by the world, the flesh, and the devil. Temptations of the world are the seductive evil conduct of other people. Temptations of the flesh are the natural inclinations we have to committing sin, by our urges to pride, lust, anger, greed, envy, laziness and gluttony.

Temptations from the devil are the urges to commit sin which are prompted by the evil spirit who wants to lead human beings into hell. What the temptations of Christ by the evil spirit indicate is that the devil did not really know who Christ was.

Jesus therefore was “tempted” by the devil not to be led into sin but to be tried, tested if you please, and the trial was painful. But there was no question of Christ’s being tested in His loyalty to His heavenly Father. Why then must we say that Christ was really tempted? He was tempted, but we better understand what temptation in Christ’s case means.

This brings us back to our original question: Why was Christ tempted?

By His temptation, Christ allowed Himself to be tested by the devil, in order to expiate our sins of giving in to the devil. As a Second Adam, Jesus atoned for the sin of the first Adam – and his progeny – who gave in to the deceits of the devil.

By His temptation, Christ showed us how we are to overcome temptation. We are tempted and often give in. Christ’s overcoming the devil is a model on how we are to cope with Satan.

By his demonic temptation, Christ showed us what we are to expect. The devil tried to stop Christ from his Messianic mission in Palestine. The devil is doing the same today. He is not only tempting but successfully seducing countless human beings from carrying on salvific mission of Jesus Christ.

## **TEMPTATIONS OF CHRIST**

The prelude to Christ’s temptations is described by the evangelist “then Jesus (after being baptized by John) was led into the desert by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. And after forty days and forty nights he was hungry” (Matthew 4:1-2).

In the Old Testament, we are told that Moses and Elizah fasted forty days and forty nights in order to obtain the grace they needed for their mission from God. Needless to say, Christ's mission was higher than those of Moses and Elizah. Yet Christ, who did not have to fast, did so, in order to teach us that penance is the ordinary prelude to doing God's will.

Our forty days of Lent are a liturgical memory and practice based on Christ's forty days of fasting. Jesus was hungry; because He was human.

**First Temptation.** According to St. Matthew, "The Tempter came and said to Him, 'If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread.' But He (Jesus) answered and said, 'It is written, not by bread alone does man live, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

What are some of the lessons that Christ's first temptation should teach us? First of all, the devil wanted to find out if Jesus was really what he suspected, namely the Son of God. He knew that God in human form could not be successfully seduced into sin.

We may say that Christ's first temptation was to gluttony. Having fasted for forty days and forty nights, He was obviously very hungry. The devil knew from experience that persons who fast are also tempted to gluttony. This is not as obvious as may seem.

But more precisely, this was rather a temptation to lose confidence in God's providence. The implication is that for a person, who has been seriously mortifying himself, there is always the temptation to doubt whether the mortification was truly pleasing to God.

It was not the Father's will that Jesus should work a miracle merely to meet His natural needs. The miracles, which Christ performed, were all acts of charity towards others.

Finally, Christ quotes from Sacred Scripture not only to resist the temptation with His human will. His main reason was to give us the revealed grounds for not yielding to the devil. After all, the devil is a deceiver by his very nature. He is to be opposed by the truth, as revealed in the inspired writings of the Bible.

**Second Temptation.** Following St. Matthew, we are told, “then the devil took Him into the holy city and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written, ‘He will give His angels charge over you; and upon their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’ Jesus said to him, ‘It is written further, you shall not tempt the Lord your God.’”

What is the sin to which the devil tempted Jesus here? It was the sin of presumption. How so?

Satan took Jesus to the peak of the temple, and then told Him to throw himself down. Angels will protect Him from being harmed.

But Christ again countered with a quotation from Sacred Scripture, also from Deuteronomy.

What was the devil telling Christ to do? He was telling Him to act unwisely, imprudently and rashly. How so? By presuming that God will work a miracle without a justifying cause.

This has a multitude of implications for our spiritual life. But the most fundamental is the sin of presumption. In this case it meant expecting God to give us the light in strength we need to do His will without prayer. What are we saying? We are saying that God can often place us into humanly impossible situations. Note the word “humanly” impossible. My favorite definition of divine grace is a light and strength we receive from God to do what is the naturally impossible to fulfill. But that is exactly why we must pray. We must pray, I do not say frequently. We should pray constantly. Why? Because in God’s mysterious providence He will place us into circumstances which we cannot cope with without supernatural help from God. Prayer is the infallible guarantee of being able to do God’s will, no matter how naturally impossible the situation may be.

**Third Temptation.** In recounting the last temptation, St. Matthew is very detailed:

Again the devil took Him up to a very high mountain, and showed Him all

the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. And he said to Him, "All of these things will I give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone Satan, for it is written, 'The Lord your God shall you worship and Him alone shall you serve.'" Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.

It is not certain whether the devil actually took Christ out to a high mountain or simply appealed to the Savior's imagination. What we dare not forget, however, is that the devil is the prince of this world. He knows that the strongest temptation in our lives is to be accepted by others even when this acceptance may mean the rejection of God.

Note the promise that the devil made to Jesus. He promised the Savior all the kingdoms of the world on only one condition, that Christ fall down and worship him. This was the last straw. Everything which proceeded was only a preparation for what the devil has in mind every time he tempts us. His purpose is that we might fall down in adoration before the evil spirit.

That is why it is crucially important to understand what we professed Christians understand by adoration. To adore means to recognize that there is only one God. To adore means to recognize there is one God as the only Creator of heaven and earth. No one else except God may be adored. He must be adored by the mind recognizing Him as our Creator and Lord. He must be adored by the will in serving Him, except for whom nothing but God would exist. The key word is *only*. No one else but God may be given divine honors.

Yet we live in a world where one creature after another is, in effect, adored as though it were God. In the last analysis, every temptation is a seduction to adoring a creature as though it were divine.

How this needs to be understood. Every time we are urged to do our own will, contrary to the will of God, we are being tempted to self-adoration. This is, in fact, the prevailing seduction of the modern world. The very word we have coined, *pro-choice*, expresses what we are talking about.

We have some idea of how devastating this philosophy of self-adoration has become from the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, the evil genius behind Marxism. According to Nietzsche, Christianity is not only to be doubted or dismissed as

fancy. It is to be denounced in the most unmeasured language.

In Christianity neither morality nor religion has even a single point of contact with reality. Nothing but imaginary *causes* (“God,” “soul,” “ego,” “spirit,” “free will”-for that matter, “unfree will”), nothing but imaginary *effects* (“sin,” “redemption,” “grace,” “punishment,” “forgiveness of sins”). Intercourse between imaginary *beings* (“God,” “spirits,” “souls”); an imaginary *natural science* (anthropocentric, no trace of any concept of natural causes).

This *world of pure fiction* is vastly inferior to the world of dreams insofar as the latter *mirrors* reality, whereas the former falsifies, devalues, and negates reality. (Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, I, 15 (Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche*, New York: Vikings, 1854, pp. 581-82).

Anyone who does not believe that the modern world has been deeply paganized, which means dechristianized, has only to read Nietzsche. Nietzsche is one of the standard philosophers of modern education.

How we need to reflect on Christ’s temptation by the devil to begin to realize how deeply today’s society has been demonized.

---

Copyright 1998 InterMirifica

No reproductions may be made without prior written permission.

---

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16

---

17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

<sup>26</sup> Psalm 2:1-8.

<sup>27</sup> Isaiah 11:1-3.

<sup>28</sup> Psalm 110:4. Confer also, Genesis 14:17-20.

<sup>29</sup> Hebrews 6:20-7:24..

<sup>30</sup> Journal of a Soul Pope John XXIII pg 365-366

<sup>31</sup> Burns, Emile editor. *Handbook on Marxism*: International Publishers: 1935 pg. 250.