

# REVELATION DOWN THE AGES

ONE OF THE most important documents produced by the Second Vatican Council in terms of its far-reaching effects was the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (1965). In this document the Council taught that divine revelation is primarily God's self-communication, and only secondarily, and as a consequence, is it a communication of truths. In order to appreciate the significance of this teaching we need first to reflect on how the notion of Divine Revelation had become diluted down the centuries. The Church had been forced to protect its teaching and sometimes even its reason for existence against hostile currents of thought and philosophies from the earliest times, and in the stress of battle the full meaning of divine revelation had been lost to view. Especially the rich personal, dialogical notion of revelation as God's self-disclosure was forgotten.

In the early centuries of the Church, under the influence of Greek philosophers it was proclaimed that the truth the philosophers were seeking is the Logos (truth) incarnate, Jesus Christ. In the context of Latin philosophers revelation was explained as illumination, an inner light which enables us to believe (rather than *what* we believe). The medieval Christian philosophical theologians explained revelation as truths, knowledge—the truth which God communicates. Revelation became identified with the content of revelation, the truths which are necessary for our salvation. Revelation was often referred to as the 'deposit' of revelation, understood as a fixed number of statements or propositions, such as one finds in the Church's creeds, summaries of the truths Christians accept in faith.

At the Council of Trent when the main purpose was to defend the Catholic faith, especially against attacks from the Reformers, the sacraments, tradition as well as Scripture, the authority of pope and bishops, the ministerial priesthood became primary concerns. A defensive-

ness entered into Catholic teaching and preaching and catechesis which obscured the more fundamental inter-personal communication between God and the Christian believer.

Under seige from the anti-religious attacks of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century rationalism during the Enlightenment, which asserted the total autonomy of human reason and rejected the very possibility of revealed knowledge the Church proclaimed and defended the Bible and Church tradition. But the Church's response was rational, highly deductive and non-historical. Vatican Council I continued in this rational vein, defending the faith, but predominantly the discourse was about truths and teachings. The biblical basis of the teachings was not developed, nor was revelation considered as a personal self-disclosure by God.

The Modernist movement tended to overreact to the rationalistic tendencies, and as a consequence the notion of divine revelation was in danger of being reduced to human experience. There was a tendency to downplay the supernatural character and content, the divine origin of revelation. The Modernist movement was severely dealt with by Church authorities. Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) was an uncompromising rejection of the 'modern mind'. Modernism was condemned by the Holy Office (now 'The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith') in the document *Lamentabili* (1907), and in the encyclical of Pope Pius X, *Pascendi* (1907), while anyone taking on special responsibilities in the Church was required to swear the Oath against Modernism.

With the pontificate of Pius X the condemnations reached their peak. Clearly, the dialogical character of divine revelation was not given any consideration—the Church's attention was elsewhere.

Something of the anti-Modernist feeling was still reflected in the encyclical, *Humani Generis* of Pius XII (1950). But meantime the scholars had been moving on, especially the

biblical scholars, who were developing a scientific approach to Sacred Scripture called 'higher biblical criticism'. The early distrust of these new methods in biblical scholarship were put aside in the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pope Pius XII (1943) and responsible use of the new methods of biblical criticism was encouraged.

### *The Second Vatican Council*

The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (1965) produced by the Second Vatican Council was a break-through and a true liberation from all the former controversies and their effects on Church teaching. But this break-through was itself the result of a major change in direction in the Council. The first draft of the document on Divine Revelation that was presented to the Council fathers for consideration was still affected by the anti-Modernist mentality. The draft was fighting past adversaries and was full of condemnations. Its defensiveness reflected the text-book material in seminary courses of the time. Many of the Fathers came to the Council with that mentality.

But the mood in the Council chamber had changed. The message in Pope John's opening speech to the Council had been heeded: the Council was to lead the Church to abandon its defensiveness, move from condemnations (anathemas) to compassion, and present the Catholic faith in new and positive ways. Also the debates on the schema or draft for

the document on the liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* had set a new course: the Council was all about the Church's own life and the sources of it.

The first draft of the document on Divine Revelation did not reflect that new mood and consequently was heavily criticised in the Council. After an intervention by Pope John that cleared the way to overcome some procedural obstacles the majority view of the Council fathers was allowed to prevail, and the first draft was rejected. A new commission was set up to prepare a new draft that would reflect the mood of the majority of the Council fathers.

And so the Council produced the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*. In this document the Council emphasised that revelation is above all God's self-communication, and is not to be reduced to a communication of truths.

At the beginning of the final session of the Council the Synod of Bishops was established to continue and apply the work of the Council in all areas of the Church and to bring it to maturity. The Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, the subject of the next article by Mark Kenney, is one of the fruits of the on-going work of that Synod of Bishops. *Verbum Domini* is the document produced by Pope Benedict following the synod on the Word of God. In a number of the articles that follow Mark Kenney's we are presented with descriptions of some past and future approaches to defending and/or communicating the Catholic faith.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor

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All God's self-revelation in so many ways down the history of salvation is recorded for us to read, hear proclaimed, ponder and pray about in the Sacred Scriptures, Old Testament and New Testament. God's revelation of himself culminates in the person and ministry of Christ, the Word of God become man. 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he has created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being...' (Hebrews 1:1-3). And in John's Gospel we read: 'No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known' (Jn 1:18). It is in the Son, the person of Jesus Christ, Word of God, that the Father communicates his whole self. In Jesus God has become incarnate, and 'We saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).