

Tract 10: Revelation, Dogma, and Catholic Spirituality

The last two hundred years and more have witnessed many calls for a revision or re-expression or some kind of bringing up to date of Catholic dogma. The promised end of this revision or *aggiornamento* is to be an easier access on the part of the faithful to the experience of God and Christ. What is the point of dogma except to orient us to and enable a religious experience that is properly Christian? Dogma is to put us on the same path with the same prospects made by those who first formulated Christian teaching. It is they who have some preeminent experience of God in Christ who paradigmatically formulate doctrine for us, as did St. Paul in the first, St. Athanasius in the fourth, and Maximus the Confessor in the seventh centuries. But the twentieth and now the twenty-first century is not that of Paul or Athanasius or even the century that most aspired to timelessness but of course failed, the thirteenth. The biblical theology of St. Paul is not the Platonism of Athanasius or the Aristotelianism of Aquinas. A revised dogma, a reformulated dogma, is to put us on the path laid out by Paul, Augustine, the Areopagite, but not at the same mile-marker. This is not to entertain some bogus notion of “doctrinal progress,” however. The project is not so much a matter of doing a better job than what previous centuries did, but simply of doing what they did for our own century. It’s more like changing oil and rotating the tires in the car we already have than getting a new model.

In any and every case and in every time, however, the point of dogma is therefore, as it were, beyond it. Dogma is to get us into that space where we can know the consolation of the Holy Spirit in the difficult spots of our lives, the space where we know the peace of Christ that passes understanding (Phil 4:6). Even more, dogma is to get us into that space where we connect with the experiences of other people both spiritually and morally. At this point, the space in question is communally inhabitable, and lets us acknowledge our common dignity because we all experience the founding

and framing and freeing dignity of the divine. The space in question, in other words, is what ecclesial space aspires to be, but not always successfully, but where failure is sometimes nothing more than a function of time passing, and occurs automatically because the once nourishing ways of pointing us to the transcendent have passed their “sell” date. And just because some of the once serviceable but now old boundaries will be left behind in the re-articulation of dogma, the new ecclesial space will be more ecumenically and inter-religiously friendly.

The foregoing description of the project of doctrinal renovation that challenges us has been so often repeated, from the time and toils of modernism (and liberal Protestantism before it) to the hopeful buds of the “new theology” to the projected post-conciliar *aggiornamento*, that it seems to be the default position of Catholic mindfulness, something evident and obvious once some modicum of historical awareness has entered the sacred precincts. For it is precisely such awareness that seems both to require and give permission for dogmatic reformulation. Once we see how the sausage is made—how the beasts are slaughtered and the meat cut and ground up—which is to say, once we see the chances and contingencies of the actual history that surround the production of dogma, not all of them savory, then dogma appears to be more a creature of history, and so of our freedom, than we realized. The chances and contingencies that mark doctrinal history, moreover, also mark the history of revelation itself. The necessity and possibility of doctrinal reformulation are deliverances of both the history of revelation and the history of the Church.

If we get any deeper in history than the last two hundred years, however, the apparent malleability of dogma relative to historical contingency and its ordination unto fostering religious experience do not turn out to describe a default position that would be recognized always, everywhere, and by everyone in Christendom. Describing revelation and the word of God and ecclesial dogma *in fieri* is not to take them *in facto esse*, as presented to us in finished form. So, there is another way to think of the task relative to dogma that we face in our own time. When the Bible speaks of dogma—and of course it does—we get a quite different picture of things.

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him, no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do. (Heb 4:12–13)

This rather reverses the direction from which we are to assess the point and utility of dogma. Hebrews here thinks of it from God's point of view, not our own. The word of God—and also when it is shaped up ecclesially in dogmatic definitions—is here too conceived of as an instrument. But it is not first of all our instrument; it is first of all God's instrument, the instrument of his choice for discerning our hearts. We thought dogma was ordered to experiencing God. But it's not. It's ordered to God's experiencing us.

What does he want to experience? To test? Our God is a "consuming fire" (12:29), and in the first place he wants to test what we have built on the foundation of Christ, whether with gold or silver, straw or hay (1 Cor 3:11–12). The living word of God pierces to the division of soul and spirit, marrow and joints, intentions and thought; that is, it divides thought from action, faith from the works of charity—spirit and pith on the one hand from desiring soul and operative joints on the other. Whatever we build on the Foundation will be saved as long as it really is built on the Foundation. Which is Christ. The Foundation, known by faith, supports the moral action of our lives, and if the moral action of our lives is not supported by the Foundation, it will be burnt up. Here, dogma is oriented not up, not up to the experience of God, but out, out to the experience of the neighbor in charity. These dogmatic truths that direct our action concern our common human dignity, indeed, and especially today they command respect for life, respect for a marriage bed that unites male and female, and an explicit concern for a common polity that publicly acknowledges the debt of justice to God. These things are securely anchored to the Foundation. But same-sex unions, recognition of a right to kill the babe in the womb, and connivance in the naked public square are not. We know this not just because that is the way our ancestors lived, but because these practical directives of Christian life are directly founded in Christ himself. He is the Life who loves life (John 10:10; 14:6). He is the Bridegroom who makes his Bride fruitful (Eph 5:25). And he teaches that things are due to God in the same public order in which things are due to Caesar (Mark 12:17).

In the ways just mentioned, dogma directs us to the world. But it does so only because God has come into the world—in the Foundation, in Christ. But here again, we look not so much up, to an experience of God, and not even out, to the neighbor, but down, to the Foundation under the edifice of Christian life. At this point, the word of God is the Word of God become flesh. It is a Foundation that is laid down only by apostolic preaching (1 Cor 3:10). To be sure, faith comes from hearing (Romans 10:17). The act of faith, however, terminates in the message heard, not in any wordless experience of God on the other side of it. The Foundation is delivered to us exactly and

only in the very terms of what is preached. For we confess *with our lips* and so are saved, only so (Rom 10:10).

Now, there is a building on the Foundation in addition to that of moral action. Beyond the “elementary doctrines” concerning repentance and faith and baptism and resurrection and eternal judgment (Heb 6:1–2), there are doctrines concerning the sacrifice and priesthood of Christ that Hebrews concerns itself with at length. Why are these doctrines for the mature (6:1)? First, they explicate the intelligibility of the action of Christ, the action of God in Christ; they articulate its truth. Second, they declare the availability to us of the fruit of Christ’s action in the sacraments of the Church (13:10), as Tridentine dogma teaches us, with its complements in the Second Vatican Council’s *Lumen Gentium* and *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Third, they are for the mature because they tell us that being on the Foundation means making up in our bodies what is lacking to the saving suffering of Christ (Col 1:24; Heb 10:32–34; 12:4–8; 13:13).

If the Foundation of all dogma is Christ, then the idea of bringing dogma up to date is indistinguishable from bringing the Foundation up to date. But the Letter to the Hebrews forestalls such a thing when it says that Christ is “the same yesterday and today and for ever” (13:8). According to this dictum, the presupposition of there being any history whatsoever—namely, a continuing self-same reality by reference to which all other things are temporally ordered—is fulfilled for Christian faith in Christ. Historical mindedness for Christians there certainly is, therefore, but it means having the mind of Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, took flesh and humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death in time to his eternal Father. It is because Christ is the form of time that Christians are confident that his words, though spoken in time, will not pass away. And this is so even if their not passing entails that they take successive forms in the words of the New Testament, of the Church’s Tradition, of dogma. But these formulations, even if they spell out some new understanding embedded in the old, maintain “the same sense, the same judgment,” and one can even say, as does the Church, “the same dogma” (First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*). If there is progress in understanding, still, we have the same judgment, which is to say the same dogma, at Chalcedon as at Ephesus as at Nicaea. That our faith is the same and embraces the same truth about Christ as that of the fourth or fifth or nineteenth century is just the flip side of the abiding and unchanging reality of Christ, the same yesterday and today and tomorrow. He was given to our collective knowledge once for all, for that is all that is necessary given the time-transcending capacity of human words to maintain the divine word spoken by means of them. That *our* words are

so capable is part of the promise that *his* word will not pass away (Matt 24:35). This capability, moreover, belongs to the social and public character of the addressee of revelation that revelation presupposes. The Church is a community. Last, it is indicated by the very nature of Christian revelation in that it can be reflexively possessed as revelation because of such words as the prophetic “thus saith the Lord” and the dominical “but I say to you.” That we know the Lord *says* what he says belongs to our grasp of a revelation that comes to us *as* revelation.

Seeing how the sausage is made within the framework of Christ’s time, which is God’s time, for whom all created things, including the created freedom of men and angels, are instruments, removes any scandal from the history of dogmatic formulation. God subverts the devil’s plans by out-planning him. This happens signally at the most central action of the order of salvation, where the Cross itself undoes the devil by using him and the evil he compasses to undo his empire (1 Cor 2:7–8). The mob of monks at Ephesus, imperial pressure at Chalcedon, the politics of empire at Trent, political anxiety in the nineteenth century—none of this escapes the transcendent causality of God. It is only a historical accident, the accident that the modern history of dogma grew up within modern positivism, that makes us forget this.

Bringing dogma up to date, insofar as it means abandoning the “pattern of sound words” (2 Tim 1:13) and involves us in contemporary ideologies (cf. Col 2:8; 1 Tim 4:7), returns us to the idea of wanting to experience God, wanting, that is, to test him and control him. We seek to put God to the test (Heb 3:8–9). But “he is found by those who do *not* put him to the test” (Wis 1:2). If rather he tests us, however, then there is a way to prepare for it. The Letter to the Hebrews compares the word of God to a scalpel by which God performs a sort of open-heart surgery on us. But the Bible also tells us to *eat* the word of God. Jeremiah does so, and his heart rejoices (15:16). Ezekiel eats the scroll on which the word of God is written (2:8–3:3), and so does John in the Book of Revelation (10:8–9). After all, man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matt 4:4). And Hebrews too speaks of doctrine as food for the mature (5:14).

We eat the word by our faith, to be sure, and this installs it in our heart (Rom 10:9). But when the Lamb opens the scroll in Revelation (5:9), he himself is the book he opens, St. Bernard says. So, eating the scroll is eating the word of God is eating Christ. And we eat him also in the Blessed Sacrament (John 6:53–58). The unity of word and sacrament in the Church gives a hermeneutical key to the understanding and re-articulation of dogma, something like the following: no sermon or explanation of faith that gives

scandal when spoken publicly at Mass in the presence of the Church and her Head can be valid. This unity thus bespeaks an examination of conscience: I cannot eat the Bread in charity if I do not hold to the Creed in faith. Dogma protects the integrity of the Sacrament, and it follows that we all cannot eat the Bread in charity and in common if we do not recognize the Body and hold to the Creed in faith. But the Sacrament in turn vivifies dogma, as charity makes faith alive.

This reminds us of what Catholics bring to the ecumenical table. It is not the Eucharist, and not really even doctrine about the Eucharist and the Sacrifice. It is not particular doctrines that we bring so much as the doctrinal thing itself. With Scripture and Tradition, it makes a threefold cord that is hard to break (cf. Eccl 4:12; *Dei Verbum* §10). But if we thought it was just us who bring it to the table, we wouldn't bring it. We are commissioned to bring it to an undivided Church as a constitutive part of that Church, just as the Church is commissioned to bring the word of God to the world.