

THE CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY

Just fifty years ago next Sunday the Catholic Church in the United States of America came of age. On June 29, 1908 Saint Pius X by his Apostolic Constitution *Sapienti Consilio*¹ removed the Church in our land from the jurisdiction of the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide and thus raised it from the status of a mission church to equal rank with the more ancient churches of Europe. The childhood and adolescence of our church had come to an end. The age of maturity, it was hoped, had dawned.

Fifty years have passed. The one hundred dioceses of 1908 have become the nearly two hundred of today; the fifteen thousand priests of half a century ago have multiplied to the more than fifty thousand of 1958; and the thirteen million Catholics of the early twentieth century have grown to over thirty-six million by today's best estimate.²

This golden jubilee year of the American church's coming of age marks, then, a long step toward maturity for a church living among a people only now awakening to an understanding of the responsibilities of its own national maturity in the world community. In numbers, in prestige, in beneficent influence the Catholic Church in America today is hardly recognizable as the homogeneous descendant of the church of fifty years ago. And parallel to this external growth the inner vitality of the Church, its supernatural increase in the spiritual and intellectual life of clergy and people, constitute great grounds for gratitude to God.

This very growth hurls an almost frightening challenge at the Church of today, to its priesthood, to its laity, and, I venture to suggest, especially to its theologians. This is a challenge that comes from without the Church, from the vast non-Catholic majority of Americans with their current heartening concern with things of great relevance to religion and theology. It comes from

¹ *Acta Sanctae Sedis* 41 (1908) 431-432.

² *Official Catholic Directory* (New York, 1908, 1958).

within the Church, from the consoling but demanding growth in spiritual and intellectual awareness among our Catholic people. And it comes perhaps most urgently from within Catholic theology itself, from the internal dynamism of this living science in these most changing and challenging times.

This is not perhaps the time to enlarge on that challenge as it rises from the non-Catholic world in which we are immersed. Though surely we sense a new stirring of minds and hearts in that world that betokens some disillusionment with the neo-pagan atmosphere that so largely colors our cultural surroundings. And only our faith in God's never-failing love for man can mute our astonishment at the deep love for Christ that has inspired the ecumenical movement among Protestants here and abroad. This may well be the most significant trend in Protestantism since the Reformation, a trend that takes on new urgency from Protestant awareness of and disedification at the spectacle of a "divided christendom," especially in mission fields abroad, and at the startling proliferation of that *reductio ad absurdum* of religious emotionalism seen in the Pentecostal groups and their spread here and throughout the world.

From this national religious ferment one fact emerges to startle, and it may be, to shame the Catholic theologian: the Catholic Church in America *is not known*. It is not known for what it is, it is not known for what it offers for the well-being, the unity and the spiritual transformation of our country. Years of indifference and contempt for a Catholic minority have drawn a dark curtain across the face of Christ's Church. But it is also true that Catholic theology has within its resources much that it has not yet effectively contributed to the political and social culture of our people. Only too many see "not the Church of Christ that Catholics behold but a huge monolithic structure, a kind of vast pressure group, intent on restricting here, banning there, and picketing everywhere," in the words of James O'Gara.³ Till our ecclesiology succeeds in substituting the true picture of the Church of Christ for the ridiculous and insulting image of it lodged in so many American minds, our theological task is unfinished.

³ James O'Gara, "Catholics and the Dialogue," *The Commonwealth*, 58 (May 30, 1958) 228.

And none of us is unaware of the newly pressing call on theology that comes from the inquiring, and too often dissatisfied minds of an intellectually awakening Catholic laity. This is a call and a need for a presentation of our faith that stresses its relevance to the human predicament of this day, in this land and in this world. The eagerness with which the American Catholic reader has seized on the translations of European Catholic theological works is one striking manifestation of this new hunger. The growing number of non-Catholic publishers actively engaging in the spread of such imports is a twentieth century proof that the children of this age are shrewder in their relation to their own age than the children of light.⁴ Not yet can we say with confidence that this need for an intellectually mature presentation of our faith is being met by the Catholic theologians of America.

But for the Catholic theologian the challenge closest to home is the challenge that rises from within his own science. Our Catholic faith is a living faith, the Church of Christ in America is a living, active force. And the Catholic theology that is the intellectual formulation of that faith and the intellectual bulwark of that Church is a living and demanding reality. The demands it makes are many and great; they can terrify at times, but always they inspire and embolden the man who will rise to their call. The Catholic theologian everywhere, but in a special way the American Catholic theologian, stands before a door thrown wide open to a new and adventurous world of the mind.

The evidence of this lies all about us. The soil our theology must cultivate is the restless and inquiring mind of modern man. And this stirring of man's mind has already revitalized the liturgical movement, has given new life to Catholic biblical scholarship, as it has posed soul-searching questions for the moral theologian and indeed as it has challenged the whole field of Catholic theology to find in the roots of its past, in the indispensable sources of its only true vitality, Scripture and Catholic Tradition, and in the methods of its greatest practitioners the material and the inspiration to erect a synthesis of divine and human knowledge in which the revelation of God's unceasingly active love for man can once

⁴ Luke 16:8.

again become the energizing heart of all human knowledge and all human life.

And Catholic theology has begun just such a return to its sources. We have only to cite as examples the newly intensified study of our patristic heritage and the increasingly enlightening investigations of the philosophical and theological treasures of the medieval period. But the best exemplification of this return to primary sources remains the fresh and courageous attack on the whole world of problems that center about the Holy Scriptures. And it is the very courage of the attack that gives rise to a host of new problems in regard to content and methodology in the broad field of Catholic theology. If we look for challenges within our own home, surely we meet them here.

Let us make no mistake. We are witness to a truly momentous rebirth in Catholic biblical scholarship, a rebirth recognized, approved and encouraged above all by the *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII.⁵ The extraordinary advances in archeological research, the uncovering of so many ancient biblical and allied manuscripts, the ever expanding knowledge of the languages and literatures of the age-old Near East, the gradual reconstruction of the cultural, artistic and religious background of the Old and New Testaments have been so many lamps to throw new light on the meaning and the implications of the Bible. Add to these the renewed emphasis, in the theology of biblical inspiration, on the very human instruments used by God in the composition of the inspired writings, with its concomitant re-examination of the literary characteristics, the historical conceptions and methods and the racial and cultural ambience of these human authors, and we begin to understand the origin of the invaluable insights modern scholarship has gained into the written word of God.

Such research could not fail to multiply problems for Catholic theology. And in fact it has not failed to unbalance more than one nineteenth century theological presupposition, nor to discredit some long-cherished items of theological folklore. But it has at the same time opened the way to a more realistic and more solidly

⁵ *AAS* 35 (1943) 297-325.

grounded theology of Christian revelation. Time will permit us to glance at one or two of the challenges which thus arise.

There is challenge, for instance, in the suggestion that the time is now ripe for a re-evaluation of an older view of the nature and the mutual relationships that obtain between the two primary sources of divine revelation, the inspired scriptural documents and the monuments of Christian Tradition. The Council of Trent definitively reaffirmed the existence of these sources.⁶ But the question may be asked: does this mean that Scripture and Tradition are two parallel but separate sources with the result that divine revelation must be looked for partly in one and partly in the other? And must we then conclude that Sacred Scripture does not, in any true sense, contain the whole deposit of faith? Certainly this has been, for many years now, the accepted interpretation of the Tridentine decree and the interpretation enshrined in all the best theological manuals. Yet the researches of recent years have brought to light this historical fact: the original draft text of this decree of Trent was worded to read that the Christian revelation is contained "*partim* in libris scriptis et *partim* in sine scripto traditionibus." This form of the text, however, was not accepted as definitive on the plea of many that its wording discredited an undeniably Catholic position that held the inspired Scriptures to contain the whole of divine revelation. The plea was successful. And the final official reading spoke of divine revelation as contained "*in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus*," a reading deliberately framed to leave the question open to further discussion. The story of how, despite this change of wording by the Council, the interpretation generally accepted by theologians, following Melchior Cano and Robert Bellarmine, saw the two sources as each in its own sphere a *partial* repository of Christian truth, is too long to detail here. One strong contributing factor undoubtedly was the inaccessibility of the acts of the Council.⁷

But the point to be made is this: there is strong evidence of the

⁶ Session IV. *DB* n. 783.

⁷ Josef Rupert Geiselmann, "Das Konzil von Trient über das Verhältnis der Heiligen Schrift und der nicht geschriebenen Traditionen" in *Die Mündliche Überlieferung* by H. Bacht, H. Fries and R. J. Geiselmann (München, 1957) 125-206.

existence before Trent, and of a somewhat muted existence after Trent, of a Catholic theory that the traditionally preeminent place granted to Sacred Scripture in the realm of Catholic theology was due to the long cherished belief that in these Scriptures is to be found the whole of God's saving truth and the way that leads to life eternal. There is arresting evidence that this view exalting Holy Scripture as *the* source of revelation was all but universal through the golden years of scholastic theology, and through its declining years—at a time when theologians themselves seem seldom to have read the Scriptures—until the ultimate perversion of the belief at the hands of the Reformers cast a long shadow of doubt on the whole subject.⁸

From the day when Saint Anselm wrote: "Nihil utiliter ad salutem spiritualement praedicamus quod sacra scriptura Spiritus sancti miraculo fecundata non protulerit, aut intra se non contineat,"⁹ through Albert the Great's¹⁰ and St. Thomas Aquinas'¹¹ practical identification of *theologia* with the *sacra pagina* of the inspired books, to John Gerson's reply to the objection that some Christian truths, at least, can be named which Scripture does not contain: "Immo continet, respondemus, continet secundum aliquem gradum veritatum catholicarum"¹² the cry is the same: Holy Scripture is *the* source of Catholic belief and Christian life in Christ. And were we content to accept the sheer words in which this "tradition of the schools" was expressed we should be forced to conclude that the Reformation tessera "*sola Scriptura*" was the legitimate child of several centuries of Catholic thought. For time and again the scholastic theologians said the source of Christian revelation is *scriptura sola*, revelation is to be found *solum in scriptura*. Luther among the Reformers, and the great majority after him, were indeed content to accept these words, but only as torn

⁸ See Paul de Vooght, *Les Sources de la Doctrine Chrétienne* (Paris, 1954) esp. 148-161.

⁹ *De concordia praescientiae Dei et liberi arbitrii*, q. 3, c. 6; *PL* 158, col. 528.

¹⁰ *In Sent.* dist. 1.

¹¹ See *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 1 *passim*, esp. art. 8. Cf. II-II, q. 110, art. 3.

¹² *De Examinatione Doctrinarum*, Op. I, c. 183.

from the context of thought and belief in which they were found.¹³ Only within the whole context of the scholastic working methodology in theology, only in the light of their reverential submission to the authority of the Church and their diligent respect for the doctrinal weight of patristic teachings as they knew them can we ultimately judge their unique esteem for the written word of the Bible. To quote Saint Anselm again: "nullus . . . christianus debet disputare quomodo quod catholica Ecclesia corde credit et ore confitetur, non sit; sed semper eandem fidem tenendo . . . humiliter quantum potest querere rationem quomodo sit."¹⁴

Few of the scholastics theorized on the nature and respective functions of Scripture and Tradition as *loci theologici*, but all were luminously clear, in the theological methods they used, to demonstrate that the singular place accorded to Sacred Scripture as the source *par excellence* of revelation would have been unintelligible to them were Scripture to be divorced from the interpretation of the Fathers or from the teaching of the Catholic Church. Only as long as the Scriptures were read and pondered within the circumambient air of traditional Catholic interpretation would they yield to the humble seeker the saving truth their pages enshrined. To paraphrase the conclusion of Dom Paul de Vooght's study of this question,¹⁵ we may say that the teaching of the scholastic theologians from the twelfth to the fifteenth century made the preservation and transmission of Christian truth to depend upon two factors working at once, the first a basic charter, as it were, the Holy Scriptures, fixed and determined once for all by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the other a living interpretative organ constantly breathing the life of the spirit into these sacred writings. Scripture and tradition were to the scholastics mutually complementary; together they assured both stability and growth, both movement and firmly rooted unchangeableness. They were thesis and antithesis leading to a synthesis of harmonious Christian thought and Christian life. And just this harmonious synthesis was the ideal toward which all scholastic theology moved, bolstered by the conviction that

¹³ See Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* (Westminster, 1956) esp. 116-176.

¹⁴ *De Fide Trinitatis*, c. 2; *PL* 158, col. 263.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 254-264.

Christian truth in its entirety is dependent on the reciprocal interaction of a progressive energy forever seeking understanding of a changeless basic deposit of faith. And the most explicit theoreticians among them—Gerard of Bologna, John Gerson and even John Wicleff—who exalted Scripture above all else, nonetheless demonstrated in practice that Scripture studied apart from tradition and the teachings of the Church was of no value to theology and of no help to the theologian. And for this reason tradition is omnipresent in their theology even when their exposition seems most purely scriptural in its inspiration.

This is the justified defense that must be made for the scholastic period of theology. Yet when all is said and done we are left with a problem and a challenge. What is the precise nature of our two-fold source of revelation? And, above all, what is the nature of their interrelationship? A return to the sources of theology will be fruitful only in proportion to our understanding of the nature and respective functions of each. The scriptural scholar will always be subject to the perhaps unrecognized temptation to forget that the inspired writings yield their Catholic sense only as they are bathed in the warmth and light of Catholic tradition and the teaching of the Catholic Church. And the Catholic theologian is not immune from the contrary temptation to forget that his theology lives and breathes with the Spirit of God only when it draws its central substance from the written record inspired by that divine Spirit.

The rebirth of Catholic biblical scholarship, then, may well lead to a new appreciation of the pre-eminent position the inspired Scriptures should hold, but too often have failed to hold, in Catholic theology. Surely there is truth hidden in the suggestion that Scripture and tradition each gives completely, though each in its own way and in accordance with its own nature and function, the revealed deposit of faith.¹⁶ The New Testament is the very crystallization of the apostolic preaching. As such does it not represent in its own adequate form the belief of the primitive Church? This is the doctrinal heritage of our Church, intended to be such by God. This is the written record permanently enshrining the truths

¹⁶ See Charles Davis, "Notes on Recent Works," *The Clergy Review* 43 (May, 1958) 281-283.

of revelation in the form in which revelation existed in its natal freshness. Here there must be, it is suggested,¹⁷ a true plenitude of the Christian revelation consisting of all the fundamental truths and all the basic principles of the Christian faith whence all else in Christian belief and practice must flow. The Bible, in this setting, becomes the everlasting starting point from which theology draws its life, and the perennially fruitful center to which theology must always return. This is not to deny that Christian tradition created the Scriptures and was the living atmosphere in which they took shape and form and within which alone they retain their living significance and intelligibility. The soul that gives life to the Scriptural record, that makes it to be for us this day the Word of God, is the living tradition of the Catholic Church. Through this tradition the truth of Christ is a *living* truth for men.

But a further fact remains. Catholic theology in its always expanding life must ever look to the inspired Scriptures. These remain, as they were from the beginning, the initial point of all development, embodying as they do the Christian revelation as it came from the lips, and from the whole living reality, of Christ and the Apostles. Neglect of the inspired writings can only result in the loss for Catholic theology of its very heart and life-blood and of that unction which reaches men's hearts because it is the unction of the Spirit of God.

We have been touching on problems basic to Catholic theology. Equally basic is another challenge that meets the theologian in his bounden effort to present the Catholic faith in language and thought-patterns intelligible to a world whose cultural atmosphere tends to reduce to medieval folklore such Christian truths as man's divine origin, his elevation to grace, and his fall from God's favor. Like any human science, our theology does not entirely escape the danger of presenting God's truth in a manner too greatly influenced by cultural and intellectual currents that bear no necessary relevance to Christian truth at all. Constant re-assessment of our thought patterns is the onerous but necessary task of every gener-

¹⁷ See Charles Journet, *Esquisse du Développement du Dogme* (Paris, 1954) esp. pp. 1-53, and cf. Clement Dillenschneider, *Le Sens de la Foi et le Progrès Dogmatique du Mystère Mariale* (Rome, 1954) *passim*.

ation of theologians. Such re-assessment today cannot avoid a careful second look at the—in part highly imaginative—way in which theologians, from the time at least of St. Thomas, have pictured the elevation and fall of man.

The picture they presented surely erred by exaggeration in the way it exalted, beyond justification in revealed truth, the privileges of our first parents before the fall, and in the highly speculative and detailed account so many of them gave of what would have been the history of mankind, had Adam not sinned. Catholic theology today is in reaction against this kind of unfounded exaggeration, not indeed from any attempt to meet the contemporary skeptic on his own grounds, through a depreciation of the supernatural elements in our faith, but in large part from a clearer understanding of the essential purpose of divine revelation, which certainly was not intended to satisfy the insatiable curiosity of the human mind, but which *was* intended to bring to man's knowledge his *need for salvation* and the way in which God planned to provide for this need.¹⁸

Our technical expression to describe the condition of Adam and Eve before the fall is "original justice." I recall the expression because it brings out in strong relief that the essential point about the earthly paradise was a special *moral perfection*, of which the other gifts of our first parents were the fruit. They were *just* in the biblical and ecclesiastical sense of that word. They were subject to God, not as slaves to their master, but as children who found peace and security in obedience to their Father. Their Father's love for them showed itself even in the physical conditions of their environment, but the essential effect of that love was their elevation in mind and heart to the supernatural plane through *sanctifying grace*, one of the immediate effects of which was, in this case, their perfect control of all their bodily instincts and passions, and their mysterious exemption from the necessity of meeting death before they could come to the vision of God. These are the truths of God's revelation, and these are the truths taught by the Church.

¹⁸ See Maurizio Flick, "Il Dogma del Peccato Originale nella teologia contemporanea" in *Problemi e Orientamenti di Teologia Dogmatica* (Milan, 1957) 89-120.

They are, as is obvious, concerned with *spiritual, religious* and *supernatural* realities, not with things that might serve as material for the artistic productions of later ages.

What art, and theology itself, have often added to this basic pattern of truth is largely the product of the cultural and imaginative background of the Europe of several hundred years ago. And almost all of this could be stripped away with no loss to the essential Christian revelation—if this be really necessary. And there are reasons, though not wholly compelling reasons, to think some pruning is advisable. Contemporary Catholic theology must be concerned with the problem of reconciling the data of revelation on this point with what may be the true picture of man's origins, as this is being built up by the investigations of modern science in the fields of cultural anthropology, of historical biology, of archaeology, in their search for the truth of man's "pre-historic" story.¹⁹

That the essentials of God's revelation are perfectly capable of being reconciled with the findings, even with the solidly probable conclusions of modern science, is something we are certain of *a priori*. Just how it is to be done in the concrete, however, is another problem that faces our theology today.

One specific question, for instance, is this: Can the primitive man whose fossils have been discovered over a wide range of the earth be a descendant of the Adam presented by our theology as the perfect type of the human race? These fossil remains are the remains of true men who seem to have been connected with the animal world, but through Adam. Adam is the link. And if we must believe that in Adam humanity reached the high degree of physical perfection painted, for example, by Michelangelo, or, in a different medium, by the great scholastic theologians, then either the scientists have misinterpreted their findings, or our theology has drawn a deceptive picture.

The answer to such questions cannot yet be given with certainty. But there are possibilities to be explored.

Adam was surely quite different from what would have been the

¹⁹ The following remarks adopt some suggestions of M.-M. Labourdette, "La Perfection de l'Etat Originel in *Le Pêché Originel et les Origines de l'Homme* (Paris, 1953) 169-181.

end-result of a purely natural evolution of man from animal ancestry. He was elevated to a supernatural state through a rich endowment of God's gifts. But does our faith ask us to believe that he reached perfection in all details, moral and physical, in a single instant? Or may we not say that, in view of God's plans for him had he not sinned, that Adam's perfection was still in its infancy, in an infancy that did not possess full perfection, but looked forward to great future progress? This would make of Adam's primitive condition a state of wonderful potentialities, which were to develop slowly under the influence of the supernatural gifts already given.

And so also with the fall of man. That there was a fall, that it was a disaster for all men, is part of our faith. But into what did man fall? He fell into a state in which human nature was despoiled of all that made its supernatural balance and perfection, into a condition in which nature was much enfeebled in comparison with what it had been made by its supernatural elevation. But was the fall also a *relapse*? A relapse, after a short period of elevation by grace, into the laws proper to the world of nature? In the evolutionary perspective Adam's body, before and after the fall would have been very close to its animal ancestry. All the more reason then to understand that man's history should have resumed at a startlingly lower level than that which Adam had enjoyed before his sin. He could look forward only to a slow, laborious struggle to master a reluctant earth, using a new and hardly used tool, the tool of human reason, bereft now of the supernatural help it had rejected. Man would find himself, in this hypothesis, once again subject to the laws which govern the growth of every biological species, the law of gradual development, of slow adaptation to environment, involving the hazard of possible degeneration and even extinction for one or other branch of the species.

At any rate the theory of evolution profoundly transforms the view of mankind's history on earth to which theology has become accustomed over the centuries. But this view, we must concede, was the product of many factors other than those supplied by divine revelation or sound theology, and with far less solid foundations in reality and truth. In the last analysis it would be rather

with this global view of the universe and of man that modern science would be in conflict, not with Catholic dogmatic theology in its essential and immutable truth. Our Catholic theology cannot fear the truth; scientific truth, as the fruit of human reason, is as much the child of God as is revelation itself.

The human mind, of course, seems compelled, to quote Pere Labourdette,²⁰ to construct for itself a view of the universe built up of many elements in addition to firmly established truths, consciously or not adding elements of poetry, of myth and, even in the case of the unbeliever, elements of faith. For the Christian view of the world and its history, the basic data and the broad lines are fixed by revealed truth, and not every scientific hypothesis is compatible with this unchangeable framework. But the synthesis our faith permits, and our theology demands, can gradually incorporate all the genuine acquisitions of human culture, and the growth of scientific research and the progress of historical knowledge will make their legitimate contributions to its upbuilding. Undoubtedly the picture modern scientists project of the universe and of man in that universe, stands at a distance from the one Christian humanism had constructed before the day of Galilee. But who will dare to say that it is less worthy of God and His love for the universe that is the work of His hands and the mirror of His infinite perfection?

But again, I say, the problem is there. The work of our theology has not yet been completed. But the tools are in our hands. And it is part of the objective of our Catholic Theological Society of America to encourage us to take them up.

Conclusion

If I have insisted—at perhaps too great length—that Catholic theology meets more than one challenge today, let me add, by way of conclusion, that this has been no cry for some “new” theology. Excessive contemporaneity is a cultural malady that can play havoc with theology. Freshness of methods, however, merits no stigma. But it must be a freshness that draws its strength from the divine

²⁰ Labourdette, *op. cit.*, 181.

wisdom embodied in the sources of Christian revelation, a newness that is nothing other than an emphasized relevance of the needs and anxieties of a generation bewildered by the portentous growth of human knowledge unaccompanied by a corresponding advance in human understanding and human wisdom. A theology that sheds no ray of light or divine guidance on the broadened horizons of natural science, on the whole panoply of scientific achievements from the newest theory of human evolution to the unleashed forces of the lowly atom, that pays only a grudging lip service to the new understanding of the manifold sociological factors that influence so many aspects of human activity, or to the welcome light modern psychology has thrown on the inner secrets and half-perceived motivations affecting man's normal activities, is a theology at work in a vacuum. A theology that does not confront this phenomenal growth in human knowledge is a theology without meaning or influence for our contemporaries, and it can never be the solid ground for the transformation and supernaturalization of human life that it boasts as its vocation.