

SEMINAR ON FOUNDATIONS: HOW GOD "SPEAKS" AND "ACTS" IN HUMAN HISTORY

In an often-cited passage of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) the Second Vatican Council teaches:

This plan (*oeconomia*) of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation, then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man is made clear to us in Christ, who is the mediator and at the same time the fulness of revelation.¹

This passage and the entire Constitution represents, of course, a decisive advance in Catholic thinking concerning the nature of revelation; but it no less surely calls for further and more systematic consideration. To this task of continuing reflection the seminar on Foundations invites us. For it has been organized around the theme: How God "Speaks" and "Acts" in Human History. It thus presupposes the doctrine of Vatican II in its acceptance of the *fact*; and challenges to further theological reflection in its consideration of the *how*.

Now I would hold that the elements of a fuller and more systematic understanding are already at hand in the passage quoted above. I shall, therefore, seek to draw them out by bluntly formulating a thesis, and then undertaking four probes in an effort to elucidate its meaning and implications. The thesis reads: *God speaks and acts in human history through the transformation and spiritual maturation of persons.*

(1) My first probe of the thesis concerns the use of the word "God." It has become commonplace to insist that, in the present cultural context, the theologian cannot take for granted the meaningfulness of God-language. Hence the recognized need in Foundations to clarify in experiential fashion the referent intended. In this regard I find a real unity of concern which links the different enterprises of a Peter Berger (*A Rumor of Angels*), a Langdon Gilkey (*Naming the Whirlwind*), a Bernard Lonergan (*Method in Theology*), and a David Tracy (*Blessed Rage for Order*). Indeed, if one accepts, as I do, that a new cultural context requires the establishing of the theological endeavor upon new foundations,

¹Abbott edition, #2.

then the theological community is especially indebted to the important works of Lonergan and Tracy for providing valuable direction and presenting clear options.

Let me for the moment cast my lot with Lonergan and offer some soundings of the theme: the experiential placement for God-talk.

Lonergan conceives the primary task of Foundations to be the thematization of conversion. He writes in *Method in Theology*: "As conversion is basic to Christian living, so an objectification of conversion provides theology with its foundations." And he continues: "By conversion is understood a *transformation of the subject and his world*."² In particular, it is religious conversion and religious experience which provide the data, in Lonergan's view, for the functional specialty, foundations.³

Now such experience he describes as "being in love in an unrestricted fashion,"⁴ as "a conscious dynamic state of love, joy, peace, that manifests itself in acts of kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control."⁵ Moreover, such experience has a transcendent referent; for "religious conversion transforms the existential subject into a subject in love, a subject held, grasped, possessed, owned through a total and so an other-worldly love. . . . This lack of limitation, though it corresponds to the unrestricted character of human questioning, does not pertain to this world."⁶ Hence Lonergan, characterizing this "realm of transcendence" into which the converted subject is introduced, employs the Rahnerian language of Mystery. "The orientation," he writes, "reveals its goal by its absoluteness: it is with all one's heart and all one's soul and with all one's mind and all one's strength. It is, then, an orientation to what is transcendent in loveliness and, when that is unknown, it is an orientation to transcendent mystery."⁷

By way of conclusion to this first probe of the thesis let me call attention to a statement of Lonergan that seems to have passed relatively unnoticed. He writes in *Method*: "religious conversion is the event that gives the name, God, its primary and fundamental meaning."⁸ The implication I would draw for our present purpose is

²*Method in Theology*, p. 130. Italics added.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 289-90.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 341.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 350.

that the context where the word "God" functions foundationally is the context of that personal transformation which is religious conversion. Thus the "God" who is the object of theological reflection is the living God, concretely operative in the ongoing transformation of persons. If this be neglected, the risk is run of a "hardening of symbols" and a consequent "doctrinal deformation"; to which dangers Eric Voegelin has masterfully alerted us.⁹

(2) A second probe of the suggested thesis focuses more directly upon the "speech" and "action" of God. Basically it reiterates my claim that this is best conceived on the model of the transformation of persons. Let me develop the point a bit further.

In a very helpful and typically lucid paper delivered at the 1974 CTSA convention in Chicago, Avery Dulles stated that "there is no consensus among Christian or Catholic theologians as to the forms in which revelation comes, where it is principally found, or how it is related to faith."¹⁰

My own view would entail that revelation be "located" in transformed personal existence. God is "speaking" and "acting" where persons are experiencing genuine self-transcendence. Word and event certainly articulate components of this process; but the living matrix is the transformation of persons and their liberation from the many slaveries which imprison them. In this perspective revelation is the God-ward aspect and faith the man-ward aspect of this integral process of salvation.

Thus the too extrinsicist locating of revelation in external word or event is overcome. Revelation is not primarily "information," not even "sacred information." On the other hand, the excessively individualistic and reductionistic tendencies of what Dulles calls "the personalist and existential theories of revelation" are offset by the insistence that transformation of persons takes place in community and is ultimately verified in terms of community. As Lonergan has recently reminded us: "the person is not the primordial fact. What is primordial is the community. It is within community through the intersubjective relations that are the life of community that there arises the differentiation of the individual person."¹¹

Hence, to use the classic instances, prophetic and apostolic revelation will be viewed in the perspective of the transformed

⁹Cf. *Order and History*, vol. 4, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), pp. 58, 266.

¹⁰CTSA *Proceedings* 29 (1974), p. 77.

¹¹*Philosophy of God and Theology*, p. 58.

existence of persons in community, whose words and deeds are the external embodiment of inner transformation. I would also suggest that this approach gives greater systematic intelligibility to the Christian's confession that Jesus Christ himself *is* the revelation of God. He is the pattern, the prototype of human existence transformed into God. In the best single essay on revelation with which I am acquainted, Joseph Ratzinger sums up the point I am trying to make: "The actual reality which occurs in Christian revelation is nothing and no other than Christ himself. He is revelation in the proper sense. . . . This means that the reception of revelation is equivalent to entering into the Christ-reality, the source of that double state of affairs which Paul alternately describes with the words 'Christ in us' and 'we in Christ.'"¹² God's speaking and acting is recapitulated in his Word to humankind, the personal existence unto death and new life of Jesus Christ; but it is re-presented in the lives of those becoming children of God in Christ.

(3) That last phrase leads us to our third probe. It concerns the theological understanding of human history. For God has not arbitrarily ceased speaking. God continues to transform humankind after the "logic" disclosed in Jesus Christ. This process of personal transformation transpires in human history which thus stands revealed as the field of spiritual maturation (or decline). For the believer Christ is the measure which permits discernment; he is, in von Balthasar's phrase, "the norm of history."¹³

My reason for introducing this inchoate theology of history here is that it is intrinsic to the standpoint which I am suggesting. For, to confess God speaking and acting in history, to center this in the Christ-reality, necessitates some reflection upon the emergence of meaning in history and upon the goal which is thereby unveiled. It indicates that history is not an "already-out-there-now-real"; but a process whose structure or logos is revealed in the spiritual maturation of persons.

In Christian tradition the agent of this maturation is the Holy Spirit. According to Romans 8 and Ephesians 4 the Spirit works the maturation of believers, and, indeed, of the entire cosmos, according to the pattern manifested in Christ. However, it is of fundamental importance to stress that this "work" of the Spirit bears a characteristic mark: it is irreducibly corporate and com-

¹²*Revelation and Tradition*, p. 40.

¹³Cf. *A Theology of History*, c. 3.

munal. The goal of the process of transformation and maturation in the Spirit is the paradigmatic *koinonia* of Acts 2, or, more radically yet, the "one perfect person" of Ephesians 4, 13. But if this is so, if this is the goal of God's speaking and acting in history, then that goal must already be foreshadowed at the beginning of the way upon which conversion orients us. As Augustine exclaims in his inimitable rhetoric, speaking of the truth which is Christ: "ipsa est quo is, ipsa est quā is"—"it is the same truth to which and by which you journey."¹⁴ Hence the Foundations which thematize conversion already set the horizon for a theological understanding of history.

Let me offer one more consequence which follows upon the view here outlined. It provides for a new integration of theology and spirituality. Now I believe that such an integration is already implicit in Lonergan's assertion that the data for foundations is supplied by religious conversion and experience. However, when God's speaking and acting is explicitly associated with the spiritual maturation of persons, then it becomes patent that "spirituality" is not some "extracurricular" undertaking, but the very "curriculum" itself: the very matter of theological reflection.

The approach, therefore, promises to retrieve the saint for theological purposes, rescuing him or her from their hagiographic exile. In this respect I gladly second the words of von Balthasar who writes:

The Spirit meets the burning questions of the age with an utterance that is the key-word, the answer to the riddle. Never in the form of an abstract statement . . . almost always in the form of a new, concrete supernatural mission: the creation of a new saint whose life is a presentation to his own age of the message that heaven is sending to it, one who is, here and now, the right and relevant interpretation of the Gospel. . . . The saints are tradition at its most living, tradition as the word is meant whenever Scripture speaks of the unfolding of the riches of Christ, and the application to history of the norm which is Christ.¹⁵

(4) Our fourth and final probe returns us to the starting point. The emphasis upon experience which has guided the entire presentation finds practical, pastoral support in the restoral of the adult catechumenate as envisioned in the new rite for the Christian Initiation of adults. For it is the praxis of renunciation and conversion, symbolized in the sacraments of initiation, which serves as

¹⁴Commentary on The Gospel of John, 13, 4.

¹⁵*Theology of History*, Stagbook edition, p. 105.

the experiential foundations of Christian theology. Now the structure of this "movement of existence" (Ratzinger), as it receives explicit expression in the sacrament of baptism, is fundamentally trinitarian. Indeed, it is this trinitarian economy which provides the only possible starting point for a systematic doctrine of the trinity (an insight which Catholic theology had forgotten, to its own immense loss, and which only recently is being recovered).

Thus this last probe of our thesis maintains that the God who "speaks" and "acts" in human history is the triune God, employing, in Irenaeus' delightful phrase, his "two hands": the Word and the Spirit. Moreover, the primary context for the Christian use of God-language is the experiential context of renunciation and conversion, symbolized in the "awe-inspiring" rites of initiation. Consequently, from the beginning Christian theology must be trinitarian and self-consciously so. For only trinitarian categories can thematize adequately the divine-human encounter which orders history and creates communion. Such categories are fully developed and elaborated in doctrines and systematics; but, as I have argued, their basis is already established in the objectification of conversion which is undertaken in Foundations.

ROBERT P. IMBELLI
St. Joseph's Seminary
Dunwoodie