

CHAPTER TWO

REVELATION'

(Catechism nn. 50-73)

‘Revelation’

Chapter Two of the Catechism explores the ways in which God reveals God’s Self to us. In this Chapter we will deal only with the first section (n. 50-73), which speaks in general terms of ‘revelation’, leaving the matter of how revelation is transmitted and the role of Sacred Scripture for the two following chapters. The Catechism speaks of revelation from the perspective of what God has done. As already noted in the Introduction, it is we who change, not God. We will be examining revelation from the perspective of human experience: the various ways in which people grasp something of God through insights into beings that exist because they are sustained in being by God and because they participate in some way in the being of God, and in response to God’s personal communication. It is God who reveals God’s Self, not from the outside by intervention, but from within our longing and searching of which God is the Source.

Nature as a revelation of God

One obvious place where people find God revealed is in the world of nature. Paul expressed this well in his Letter to the Christian community in Rome: ‘Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made’ (Romans 1:20; quoted Catechism n. 32). This is so familiar that I hope it will suffice to quote a poem composed in 1877 by Gerard Manley Hopkins, entitled ‘God’s Grandeur’. Hopefully, as we read it, we will be reminded of the many encounters with nature that have drawn us into communion with the sacred Mystery immanent in creation.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.

People’s religious response as a revelation of God

Another place to look for revelation is in people’s religious response. Paul insists that ‘God wills everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Timothy 2:4). God has revealed God’s Self to every people, and there have always been those who have responded. We recall Paul’s words to the pagans of Lystra: ‘In past generations God allowed all the nations to follow their own way. Yet God has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and our hearts with joy’ (Acts 14:16-17).

The Vatican Council states: ‘Whatever good is found sown in people’s minds and hearts or in the rites and customs of peoples, these are not only preserved from destruction, but are purified, elevated and perfected for the glory of God’(LG n. 17). In the Prologue to his Gospel, John sees the whole of creation as a ‘word’ of God, revealing God’s gift of God’s being. He sees Jesus of Nazareth as God’s focal word, God’s word-made-flesh.

Along the same lines, in his open letter to the Roman Emperor in defence of Christianity, Justin writes:

‘Whatever lawyers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word. But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves. Whatever things were rightly said among people is the property of us Christians. For next to God we worship and love the Word who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God. We do this also because he became human for our sakes, so that, sharing in our sufferings, he might also bring us healing. For all the writers were able to see realities in an obscure way through the sowing of the Word implanted in them. But the seed and the imitation imparted according to capacity is one thing, and quite another is the thing itself of which there is the participation and imitation according to the grace which is from him.’

The same insight is expressed by Pope John-Paul in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer*:

‘The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the “seeds of the Word”, to be found in human initiatives – including religious ones – and in the human effort to attain truth, goodness and God ... The Spirit is at the very source of people’s existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of what it is to be human ... “The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit, not only instilling a desire for the world to come but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end”(GS 38). It is the Spirit who sows the “seeds of the Word” present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ’ (n.28).

He goes on to say:

‘We must have respect for human beings in their quest for answers to the deepest questions of life, and respect for the action of the Holy Spirit in people ... Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart’ (n.29).

‘God does not fail to make God’s Self present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors ...

Religious Experience

‘The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God’s grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which God has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people’ (n.55).

‘Dialogue with those of other religions is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where it wills’ (n.56).

We do not experience God directly

We experience movements of thought and feeling that engage our yearning for communion with God, but, however inspired and brought about by grace, it is our own thoughts and our own feelings that we directly experience, not the God who communicates with us in and through them. We experience people and events around us that speak to us of God and engage our yearning for communion with God, but it is actual, limited people and events that we directly experience, not the God who reveals himself to us in them and attracts us through them. We read words written by actual historical people who were inspired by God’s Spirit, but it is their limited words that we directly experience, not the transcendent God who inspired them. The inner movements and the outer realities engage our yearning for God because they disclose something of the truth, reveal something of the beauty, and participate in something of the goodness of God; but while they participate in God they are not to be identified with God.

‘God’ is the name we give to the One whom we want to know and whom we come to know in part whenever we know anything. ‘God’ is the name we give to the One with whom we want to be-in-love, and whom we enjoy in part whenever we are in communion with anything. But God always transcends any knowledge or communion we have. What we come directly and immediately to know and love is a world that is made intelligible and lovable by God, and a self that yearns for union with and knowledge of this God, and since both the world and the self exist by participating in the being of God, it is God whom we come to know and love in and through all these experiences. Revelation – the topic of this chapter – happens when the outer word finds an echo in our inner spirit, when heart speaks to heart.

Religious Experience in Judaism

Let us now focus more sharply on our Judeo-Christian culture. The authors of the Book of Exodus constantly speak of the religious experience of Moses:

‘Moses said: Oh, let me behold your Presence! And YHWH answered: I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name YHWH ... but you cannot see my face, for man may not see me and live. See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock, and as my Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take my hand away and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen’ (Exodus 33:18-23).

We are not capable of seeing God's 'face', but we can see God's 'back'. In other words, while Moses cannot have direct unmediated experience of God, he can see the way to go in order to experience communion with God. The Torah is this way, pointing to the mystery and guiding us as to the insights and values that will take us into the divine communion for which we long, and for which we were created.

When we speak of God's revelation to Moses, rather than picture God touching Moses from outside as it were, and telling Moses things that Moses would otherwise not know, we would be better to start with the longing for divine communion that God has placed at the heart of creation. This longing reached consciousness in us humans, and at various stages of human history individuals and communities were ready to open themselves to this longing and to see some of its implications. Moses was one of them. We could say the same of Isaiah ben Amoz in the eighth century BC and of Jeremiah two centuries later. This phenomenon was not, of course, limited to Israel. Gautama the Buddha and Lao-Tzu are outstanding examples from other cultures. It is just that our focus here is on the Judeo-Christian culture. Revelation is what happens when we yield to the divine energy within us. As this happens we deepen our communion with the Source of our being and what is hiding the divine from us falls away, thus revealing the mysterious God who loves us and for whom we yearn.

Religious Experience in Christianity

The revelation that especially interests us here is what Jesus came to see through his communion with God, a communion he wants everyone to share. Those who chose to follow him, firstly Jews, but afterwards from the various cultures that made up the Roman Empire and beyond, found him to be for them God's perfect human word. John speaks of Jesus as God's 'Word-made-flesh' (John 1:14): Jesus is the one who reveals God perfectly insofar as God can be revealed in human form. Furthermore, they found in Jesus the perfect human expression of God's Spirit, possessing and giving the Spirit 'without reserve' (John 3:34). Jesus' Spirit is his love-communion with God whom he addressed as 'My Father (Abba).' Jesus understood God as Love, and others came to grasp this insight through his person, his word and his spirit (see 1John 4:16). Comparing Jesus to Moses, John writes:

'The Torah indeed was given through Moses. The gift of truth [the truth of who God is] came through Jesus, the Messiah ... No one has ever seen God. It is God's only Son, the one who is in the Father's bosom, who has made God known' (John 1:17-18).

Let us listen to John of the Cross:

'In giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole word – and he has no more to say ... because what he spoke before to the prophets in part, he has now spoken all at once by giving us the All who is his Son. Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would be guilty not only of foolish behaviour but also of offending him, by not fixing his eyes entirely upon Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty' (*Ascent II*, 22, 3-5).

Personal Insights

A monotheist recognises that it is the one and only God who is experienced indirectly in nature, in people and events, in movements of thought and feeling, in words spoken and written, in works of art, indeed, in every experience. This is because God is the heart and the beyond of everything, and so everything reveals something of the truth, beauty and goodness of the immanent, but always transcendent and mysterious, God. As noted in the previous chapter, God is revealed, imperfectly, in the Vedas and the Upanishads, in the sayings of K'ung-fu-tzu (Confucius) and Gautama the Buddha, in the oracles of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Newer Testament and the Qur'an; indeed, in the mystics, poets and artists of all cultures. However, all of these can also obscure God and distract from God. It is the Christian insight and conviction that we must look at everything through Jesus' eyes and with Jesus' heart. It is only when we are, in the words of John, 'as pure as Christ' (1John 3:3), that everything will become for us a symbol of God. It was because Paul could say: 'It is no longer I who live, it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20), that he was able to relate so powerfully to those he encountered in his missionary outreach.

'Private Revelations'

We conclude this chapter with a note from the Catechism concerning what are called 'private revelations'. The distinction is between those insights into God that have been accepted by the community as basic to its constitution, and other insights which people have had throughout the history of the community.

'Throughout the ages, there have been so-called "private" revelations, some of which have been recognised by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ's definitive revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the magisterium [official teaching authority] of the Church, the *sensus fidelium* [faith-inspired insight of believers] knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church' (n. 67).