

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S FOUNDATIONAL CRISIS

Before the Synod meeting of 2014 many people were expecting fundamental changes in church teaching. The hopes were unrealistic in that a synod is not the kind of assembly from which major changes could be expected. Changes in the Catholic Church take a long time. While a patient outlook is no doubt called for, one might still wonder why after an initial week in 2014 when big questions were raised the final report seemed to pull back. And having had a year to ponder these issues, the 2015 session's final report showed little change from the first session, mostly by leaving matters ambiguous.

CHANGE OF TEACHING

At the center of the synod's discussions, the idea of change itself was the issue. Can the Catholic Church change its doctrines? There is a vocal group of bishops who say that church doctrine is unchangeable. To be fair, they do not actually deny all forms of change. Doctrines "develop" but, in the words of Cardinal George Pell, doctrines do not do "flip flops." It should be remembered that the "development of doctrine" has been accepted only since the nineteenth century. Early proponents of that acknowledgment, such as John Henry Newman, were stoutly resisted. Today's conservative bishops embrace the idea of doctrinal development. But their idea of development is that the truth was always there; the church pulls out the truth that had previously been implied. Thus, the "development of doctrine" is not a change in the doctrine but a change in our understanding of the doctrine.

That strategy for admitting change has often been convincing, especially when change has occurred over a period of centuries. Today when there are rapid changes in society a development of doctrine may be incapable of providing answers. The claim that the doctrine or teaching has not really changed but that some deeper truth in it has now become clear rings hollow. When Pope Francis was asked about the teaching in the encyclical *Humani Vitae*, he replied "the question is not that of changing the doctrine but of going deeper and making pastoral ministry take into account the situations and that which is possible for people to do." Obviously, the pope is not going to simply say that his predecessor was wrong.

For most people, including most Catholics, the encyclical was a disaster from which the Catholic Church has yet to recover. At some point the officials of the Catholic Church are going to have to admit that it is precisely the teaching in *Humanae Vitae* that needs changing. Starting in the 1930s small changes had occurred in the church's attitude to birth control. Official teaching admitted the need for "natural" birth control. In 1968 Pope Paul VI tried to halt any further changes. Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani convinced Pope Paul VI that any change would undermine papal authority. As things turned out, nothing could have been more destructive of papal and episcopal authority than defending an indefensible position.

THE QUESTION OF REVELATION

The question today is not the development of doctrine but the basis of doctrine. One might think that the basis of church teaching was thoroughly examined a long time ago. And, of course, every Catholic has some understanding of the basis of church teaching. However, there was from the beginning of the church some ambiguity in the way that this basis was formulated. Every institution assumes words that are so important that they are hardly ever spoken, let alone critically examined. But when its very existence is at issue an institution may have to try getting at the presuppositions of its own existence. No term is more basic to the church's existence than revelation; it is presupposed in theology and church teaching but it is hardly ever directly examined. The church has an intellectual crisis because of a failure to examine revelation.

The Catholic bishops have been left stranded with a meaning of revelation that they probably acquired in the seminary. Their dilemma is that they believe their job is to transmit the truths revealed by God in the first century and preserved in the New Testament and early church tradition. It is useless to attack bishops for doing what they think is their mission. The bishops have not been given much help by theologians. There is an assumption that the Second Vatican Council produced the definitive statement on revelation. Discussion of revelation since then has mainly been commentary on the council document.

The Second Vatican Council admirably took on big questions that the Catholic Church was facing. The Council made a good start but obviously could not complete the task. The first question that the Council encountered was the "sources of revelation." The group that had prepared the document could not imagine any change in that area. The document was mostly a restatement of the Council of Trent's assertion that revelation is contained in both scripture and tradition. The Council rejected the document; it was sent back to committee for a rewriting that took three years. The new document was mainly written by biblical scholars and was an improvement over the initial document.

The new document, however, was still severely limited. The first chapter, which is entitled "revelation itself," consists of six paragraphs of biblical language. It does not even raise the question of revelation itself, let alone answer the question. The weakness of the reflection in the first chapter is immediately evident in the title of the second chapter, "the transmission of divine revelation." The idea of transmitting divine revelation is unintelligible; the church can transmit documents, doctrines, and testimonies of faith but not divine revelation.

The presumption that revelation is a question mainly, if not exclusively, for biblical scholars asks too much of these men and women. "Revelation" is a philosophical, linguistic, and historical question. It is not a major idea in the Bible. Revelation means "unveiling"; the word is regularly used in secular writing with that meaning. Something that had previously been unknown has come to light. The term came into Jewish tradition shortly before the Common Era from the influence of religions that surrounded Israel. In those religions, revelation, or the Greek equivalent apocalypse, was a central idea of looking to the end of the world when the truth would be unveiled. Revelation, which is a visual metaphor, conflicted with the Bible's oral metaphor of God speaking. Speech invites another person to respond in a continuing exchange. Revelation is finished with the truth that has come to light.

Revelation's main appearance in the Christian movement was as the name of the last book in the New Testament. The Book of Revelation was a revealing or unveiling of a new heaven and a new earth to be realized at the completion of history. The Book of Revelation was something of an embarrassment in the early church and it still is for the contemporary Catholic Church. The Vatican II document on revelation seems to pretend that the Book of Revelation does not exist. The difficulty is that the Book of Revelation was very attractive to many Christians and still is. An examination of the thousands of websites on revelation would show that for the vast majority of Christians "revelation" refers to the Book of Revelation.

The early church somewhat reluctantly included the Book of Revelation in the canon of scripture. But then church officials had to struggle against revelation taking over the Christian movement. The idea then and now that the world is coming to an end has a seductive appeal. If a new earth is just around the corner why bother taking care of this one? If you know how the story ends, you need not pay attention to most of the details of history.

The struggle went on for several centuries until the church domesticated the idea of revelation, although never with entire success. The terms "revelation" and "word" were conflated in meaning as if those metaphors were not fundamentally opposed. It was a clever move but one that has never resolved the clash between the definitive unveiling of truth and the seeking of truth through speaking and listening.

Augustine posited that the thousand years referred to in the Book of Revelation referred not to what follows history but to the church's history where the truth has already been unveiled. The church's official meaning of revelation located it in the past. Once the divine revelation occurred there was no longer a secret. The church's mission is understood to be protecting and transmitting the truth that has been revealed.

Throughout the middle ages, especially in the mystical tradition, there were eruptions of protest against the confinement of revelation to the past. Within ordinary church practice the liturgy has always been a quiet protest in the name of a living God. In the liturgy of the Word, the readings from scripture are proclaimed as God speaking today. The Eucharist is believed to be the presence of the Christ, the word of God and word of man.

The fact that the term revelation is not often brought up for discussion in today's church may suggest that the problem has been resolved. More likely, the failure to examine the meaning of revelation in recent church history is the result of not wishing to stir up problems that may cause doubts and difficulties. The bishops continue to talk about the revealed truths that they are committed to preserving. With that assumption it is hardly surprising that they see no room for changes in the doctrines of the church.

The question of what place the term revelation should have in the church needs to be debated. The church cannot eliminate either "revelation" or "word" as metaphors for divine activity. But it should acknowledge that the terms are not equivalent in meaning; one of them inevitably takes

precedence. Starting with its first sentence, the Bible leaves no doubt about which comes first. (“In the beginning, God *said* let there be light”). In church practice today, however, revelation is taken literally, that is, revelation is something that can be spelled out as truths; in contrast, God’s speaking is taken to be a beautiful figure of speech.

GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF “REVELATION”

Two guidelines for the use of “revelation” might be suggested. First, a Christian use of the term revelation should be restricted to a verb not a noun. In secular speech revelation usually refers to what had been a secret and has now come to light. If the Christian Church uses the word that way – as a noun – then Christianity becomes a collection of truths from the past. The idea of the church possessing a thing called “the Christian revelation” is of sixteenth century origin.

It is possible to speak of God revealing and humans responding with the act of believing in God. The record of this exchange is testimonies of believing and formulas of belief. The Bible and earliest tradition of the church are a deposit of beliefs not a deposit of revelations. If doctrines are recognized as formulas of belief, instead of revealed truths, then change can be looked at in a different light.

A second guideline is that if revelation is not used as a noun it cannot be used in the plural. A church use of revelation as a metaphor of divine activity should always be in the singular. There is one God, one creation, one revelation to which Jews, Christians, Muslims and others respond. The church has to listen for a divine speaking and look for a divine revealing throughout all creation. Since other religious groups have a legitimate claim on the term revelation, the church would do well to listen to other voices for understanding the revelation of God.

Consider these two statements that may seem to be getting at the same thing but are widely different in their approach and effectiveness.

Archbishop William Temple, in his 1935 classic *Nature, Man and God* (p. 306), writes:

“Only if God is revealed in the rising of the sun in the sky,
Can he be revealed in the rising of a son of man from the dead.”

Temple uses the verb form of revelation and he implies a single, universal revealing. The revealing of the son of man from the dead has to be in the context of a divine revealing throughout creation. Temple wishes to point to the one, universal revelation of the divine but there is no way to make universal statements. He affirms a Christian expression of belief in a divine revealing within a context that invites other particular affirmations. There is no denial of any Christian doctrines but there is no claim that the Christian church possesses the final truth about God.

Pope Francis writes in *Laudato si* (par. 85):

“Alongside revelation, properly so called, contained in scripture,
there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of the night.”

The clumsy syntax of the pope's sentence in comparison to the poetic flow of Temple's sentence is indicative of confused thinking. The pope's statement would be a poor formulation at any time in the last five centuries, but in a twenty-first century encyclical on the environment addressed to the whole world it is a disaster. Its effect is to undermine what the point of the encyclical is, namely, that God is revealed throughout the creation which humans have a responsibility to care for. Instead, the pope isolates "revelation properly so called," as if the church could decide what the word revelation means. His phrase "contained in scripture" is straight from the Council of Trent. And a "divine manifestation" is placed next to "revelation properly so called" that the church claims to possess.

FOUR DIALOGUES

A better understanding of the meaning of revelation is necessary for four dialogues that the Catholic Church has to engage in. First, the way that church officials currently refer to revealed truths creates unnecessary conflict with the secular world. There is no revealed truth about homosexuality, contraception, or other moral issues. Whether a church doctrine is compatible with contemporary developments depends on a thorough knowledge of church tradition as well as on examining contemporary data.

Second, the use of "revelation" as something that the church possesses makes dialogue with other religions impossible. The world badly needs religious dialogue but "the Christian revelation" is a non-starter. A divine revealing to which the church responds calls for cooperation with other religions. Each religious group interprets that divine revelation in its own way. The diversity can be a source of conflict, but with an adequate context for discussion the differences can be a source of mutual understanding.

Third, more dialogue within the Christian Churches is needed for the benefit of both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. The greater biblical appreciation in the Catholic Church during the last fifty years has been a big step in inter-church understanding. And although Protestants are often bewildered by Catholic Church pronouncements on unchangeable dogmas, the stability and consistency in Catholic Church teaching are a good challenge for Protestants. Catholics understandably find it difficult to converse with fundamentalists, but Catholics sometimes mistake all evangelical Protestants as fundamentalist. The great reform movements in United States history have very often been led by evangelical Protestants who can inspire acts of dedication, courage, and forgiveness by their listening to the word of God that is spoken now.

Fourth, revelation understood to be truths revealed in the past makes dialogue within the Catholic Church unnecessary, if not impossible. But if divine revelation is an activity that occurs in the present, then church officials as members of the faithful have to listen. Instead of reciting revealed truths, church officials need the help of scholars to interpret the rich store of Catholic tradition. At the synod, the bishops were largely on their own without the "experts" that played a major role at Vatican II. Future synods and councils will need a much more diverse group of men and women as responsible listeners to a divine revealing. For that to occur the Catholic Church has to face the present intellectual crisis concerning the basis of its teaching.

Gabriel Moran is professor emeritus of educational philosophy at New York University. He is the author of 26 books, starting with *Scripture and Tradition* in 1963. His book, *Missed Opportunities: Rethinking Catholic Tradition*, is soon to be published.