

Revelation

I have been writing for 55 years on the topic of divine revelation. In 1963 I had a simple point to make and I am still trying to make that point. A sensible person would probably have quit trying decades ago, concluding either that it is the wrong point or else that I am not a good writer. I plead guilty to being an unpersuasive writer but I am convinced that the point is now more important than it was 55 years ago as a key to any reforms in the Roman Catholic Church. There was a moment after the Second Vatican Council when I thought that people got the point but my impression was wrong.

In 1963 my book, *Scripture and Tradition*, reported on a decade-long debate over whether the Council of Trent meant that revelation is contained in scripture and tradition or that revelation is contained in scripture alone as interpreted by tradition. Because the book was my MA thesis, I offered no brash opinion, but I did note in the book's first footnote that there seemed to be an unexamined problem in the debate. I wrote that "revelation is never really an object that can be divided or contained." I was forced as a reporter to speak of revelation as an object or a thing that is contained somewhere and carried down from the past instead of its being divine activity in the present.

The Roman Catholic Church continues to use, or more often to assume, a meaning of revelation that was set by the Council of Trent. The bishops at Vatican II, not wanting to contradict Trent, published a document on revelation that not only failed to answer what and where revelation is but did not address the questions. The document's first chapter is entitled "what revelation is" but it consists of 6 groups of quotations from the bible, The second chapter entitled "the transmission of revelation" implies that revelation is a something that can be contained in the Bible and, one way or another in tradition, and can be transmitted. That is the same as what the Council of Trent said.

The Vatican II document on revelation was written by biblical scholars after a disastrous first draft had been rejected. Modern biblical scholarship had undermined the claim that the Bible is revealed by God. Everything in the Bible was written by human authors who may have been inspired but they did not write truths revealed by God. A denial that revelation is contained in Scripture does not diminish the importance of Scripture. But saying, for example, that Christ is the revelation is answering the question of what with who.

The most surprising thing about the Vatican II document is that it has no discussion of the main use of revelation in the New Testament, that is, the Book of Revelation. That book's idea of a final unveiling of the truth conflicted with the main metaphor of the Hebrew Bible, God speaking to his people and the people responding.

It might have been wise for the church to have left the term revelation as a dream of the future. Instead, the church (particularly through Augustine) placed revelation in the past as the basis of church teaching. If doctrines have been revealed by God then they cannot be rejected or even seriously debated. Bishops do not often use the term revelation but whenever they are pressed on a controversial teaching, the stopper is the claim that the

doctrine is part of God's revelation. The right wing of the church mistakes a deposit of faith for a deposit of revelation. A main protest against the locating of revelation in the past is the liturgy's call for the congregation to listen and respond today.

That there is no object or thing that can be called a divine revelation is captured in the saying: "The revelation is that there is no revelation." Those words may seem to be gibberish or a self-contradiction. But if the first "revelation" is a verb and the second "revelation" is a noun, the point is that instead of a deposit in the past God speaks to human beings and they are called to respond. Of course, an individual would be foolish not to use the resources of the past and to listen from within a community of the present for understanding divine activity. Everything can be revelatory but nothing is guaranteed to be so.

Pope Francis' admirable encyclical, *Laudato Si*, calls our attention to all of creation as requiring our appreciation and care. But he writes in paragraph 85, "Alongside revelation properly so called, contained in the Sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night." Pope Francis is here quoting Pope John Paul II. Each of them probably learned this sixteenth-century formula in their respective seminaries. If revelation *properly so called* is a thing *contained* in scripture, the rest of creation is an optional addition.

The irony is that Pope Francis's statement undermines what the encyclical is meant to teach. The Pope has the issue inside out. A statement by the Anglican Archbishop William Temple gets it right: "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, using the verb form reveal, does not deny Christian teaching but he places it in the context of all creation, Thomas Aquinas points out that creation is divine activity in the present.

What is divine revelation? An activity attributed to God. Where is the result of that activity? Open your eyes.