

PLAIN TALKS ON FUNDAMENTALS

III. *Revelation*

CATHOLIC doctrine rests on two foundations: the revelation of God in nature, and the historic Revelation given to man which culminates in the coming of Jesus Christ.

We have already said something of how God is revealed to us in nature. We have seen that there is not a phenomenon in the world around us or within our own consciousness that does not tell us something of God, which can be so much as explained fully without some reference to a God, a creative, dynamic, supreme Intelligence and Will. The very existence of phenomena postulates the existence of such a One; their varied goodness and beauty tell us something of the goodness and beauty of God.

Yet, what nature has to tell us about God is not wholly satisfactory for many reasons. Although it is a fact that all phenomena in some measure reveal God, it is certainly not a fact that all men have found themselves capable of realizing that God is revealed to them in the world around them. The human mind is commonly too weak, too prejudiced, to be able to penetrate all that nature has to tell it; to see in phenomena the reflection of God's attributes; to reason out patiently and accurately all that nature implies. Some, in consequence, have even professed to deny or doubt that God exists; others have mistaken, in various ways and degrees, the reflection of God for God Himself and have identified the world with God; others, again, though finding themselves compelled to recognize divinity in nature, have been unable to see that the various perfections and beauties and powers in nature are the reflection of *one* source of all perfection, beauty and power, and so have come to worship a multitude of divinities—a god of the sea, a god of the mountains, a god of this or that river, a god of love, a god of war. God's infinite perfection is necessarily refracted in finite natures, but not all men have been able to see this or that the multi-

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tudinous perfections of nature are each but partial reflections of one Infinite God.

But even were all men capable of learning from nature all that it has to tell us about God, the result would be far from satisfactory. Indeed, the more patiently and thoroughly we study God in nature, the more we become convinced that there is infinitely more to know. Such a study of nature in fact raises more problems than it solves. Nature itself teaches that God infinitely transcends nature, it can teach us that God is man's last End, in the possession of Whom alone man's infinite cravings can be satisfied; that our souls must for ever be unquiet unless they can attain to and repose in Him. Man's yearnings are infinite and can be satisfied only by possession of the Infinite; yet man's nature and powers are finite and consequently incapable of attaining the Infinite. And not only that does nature teach us: it reveals to us not only perfection, goodness, beauty, power; but also evil: pain and suffering, physical and mental: above all, the ever-present reality of human iniquity within us and around us ever withholding us from our ideals and our God. What is the meaning of evil? More important: how is it to be overcome? How deal with pain? How break down the barrier of sin between ourselves and God?

To that nature and our own thought can give no answer. Rather, they face us with an insoluble problem, a hideous tragedy. Man appears as a tragic object, doomed by the very nature of things to eternal frustration; ever craving, whether consciously or not, to attain the Unattainable; ever unable to fulfil his purpose, to reach his End, to possess his God. A being of infinite desire, yet possessing only finite power further weakened by sin: such is man as nature and his own reason reveals him.

Now, we hold it to be historic fact that God Himself has supplied the solution. What finite power cannot do, infinite power *can* do; and we hold it to be *fact* that God has revealed Himself to man by a formal explicit Revelation, and has told man how he can, if he will co-operate with divine power, attain his fulfilment, the satisfaction of his boundless yearning, his last End.

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God has *spoken* to man. That is what we mean when we speak of Revelation with a capital *R*. We hold that to be historic fact.

God has spoken to man. That is an assertion to which many modern minds seem absurdly naïve and inherently impossible. We must say a word or two about these difficulties. The principal objections against the Catholic idea of a historic Revelation may be reduced to two: the first is mainly philosophical, and has its roots, as Pius X said, in the "Copernican revolution" which Emmanuel Kant introduced into philosophical theories of knowledge. A "Kantian" outlook, it should be said in passing, is almost part and parcel of our "modern consciousness"; and profoundly affects our way of looking at things even if we have never heard of Kant, let alone read him. The child who is told that he does not "see things," but only experiences certain changes on the retina of his eye, is on the highway to becoming a good little "Kantian." According to the "Kantian" criticism of the Catholic idea of Revelation, the whole idea that God has spoken to man and that words can tell us truth about God and our relation to Him is absurd, because words cannot tell us "truth" about anything. The whole idea of truth as the conformity of mind with being, of thought as the reconstruction of a reality which is independently of our own thought (an idea which our common-sense persists in assuming), is rejected as a mediæval naïveté. On this theory (a theory which it is of course impossible to act upon in practice) there is no such thing as objective truth—and consequently no words can express the truth of God. It should always be remembered in fairness that Kant's own object was to defend the validity of human knowledge; but what he did in effect was to divorce the human mind from reality: the "noumenon," the thing-in-itself, was always inaccessible to it. Thus cut off from any hope of reconstructing reality in the mind, or, in other words, of attaining *truth* as it had hitherto been understood and as instinctive common-sense still persists in understanding it, the followers of Kant have been compelled to substitute "experience" for objective thought. The human mind can only co-ordinate experience;

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and "truth" becomes "coherence" for the Hegelian, or "workableness" for the pragmatist.

Some thirty years ago some of the keenest minds in the Church tried to square Catholic teaching with these philosophical preconceptions. The result was the heresy which has come to be labelled "Modernism." In effect it cut at the root of traditional Christian teaching. Revelation, according to these men, was essentially *experience*; words were no more than attempts to express and communicate our experience of God. Doctrinal formulas, the teachings of Scripture, had to be regarded less as God's message to men than as human efforts to express man's feeling about God.

"Modernism" had to be condemned. If followed to its logical conclusions it knocked top, bottom and sides out of the idea of Christian Revelation. *Qui locutus est per prophetas*, we say in the Creed. *God has spoken to us by the prophets.*

That does not involve, as a second objection would have it, anthropomorphism. It means simply that God, by His almighty power, has enabled chosen men to utter and write truths about Himself and about how man is to save his soul and attain to God. He has used human instruments, using human words and human ideas, to convey truths which man by his own powers could not have discovered. If we recall what we have said previously about how human words and propositions can convey truth about God, this presents no difficulty. God, who is all-powerful and all-present, empowers His prophets so to link together ordinary, everyday words that they will express truths which He wills that men should know: truths about Himself, truths about men's selves and the destiny to which He has called them and the means He has ordained whereby they may fulfil their calling.

It was by slow degrees that man had to be so instructed by God. At first this self-revelation of God was little more than a promise, a preparation. A slow, painful historical process was necessary to wean the minds and the hearts of men away from false conceptions of God and false conceptions of themselves. It is the story of that process that is

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related to us in the Old Testament. Gradually a chosen people, an obscure oriental tribe, was brought from heathen beliefs and practices to acknowledgment of the one true God, to an ever clearer and more spiritual understanding of Him. A succession of prophets was given them to convey this progressive Revelation. By faith in that Revelation were the people of Israel themselves to be saved; it was their historic mission to bring to the world the knowledge of the true God and to prepare the way for the Saviour of all.

For all this Revelation through the words of chosen prophets was but a preparation for the climax of Revelation: the Incarnation of the Truth of God Himself. No longer mere truths, but the Truth; no longer prophets to point the way, but the Way Himself, no longer mere human words but the divine Word made man. Himself God, He reveals God to man in His own Person; Himself man, He calls on men to be one with Him in His dying and rising and so to come with Him to man's last End, to God. Revelation can go no further; He is Alpha and Omega. And He demands faith, not merely in human words that convey truth about God, but in *Himself*, His own Person. And he demands faith, not of one chosen people, but of the whole world, for His message of salvation is for all. He commands that it be proclaimed throughout the whole world, to every creature. To His Revelation He demands a universal response, a *Catholic* faith.

Of faith, which is man's response to God's Revelation, we cannot speak now. But something more must be said before we conclude this all too brief sketch of the idea of Revelation. Because the Word was made man, because our faith is no longer based merely on the words of God-inspired prophets, although God Himself has shown Himself to us and how we are to attain to Him, this does not mean that human words can now be dispensed with; that we can believe in Him without the mediation of doctrinal formulas. Words, spoken or written, are still indispensable to convey the Christ-Revelation itself to us. While He was still living and working among us, Our Lord *spoke*—spoke human words—to convey the truth about Himself and His Kingdom to men. And

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He commands His Apostles to convey that truth to others by *words*: "Go and preach." The fact of Christ, the truth of Christ and His salvation, has to be conveyed to distant nations and times, to you and me, and it is still by human words that it must be so conveyed. The Word is conveyed to others by words, the Truth by the enunciation of truths. This necessity was imposed on His followers from the first, at Pentecost. "Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his *voice* and *spoke forth* unto them . . ." (Acts ii, 14). It was with a gift of *tongues* that the disciples were then endowed. "The multitude came together and were confounded, because that every one heard them speaking in his own language . . . Parthians and Medes and Elamites . . ." and the rest (Acts ii, 6-12).

It is still, therefore, in *words* that divine Truth is brought to us. On a future occasion we must discuss how it has come about that that Truth is contained in the doctrinal formulas to which we are accustomed. But we have already progressed far by recalling the great fundamental of our faith, on which all our faith and all our hopes are built, that "God in various ways and at various times has *spoken* to our fathers through the prophets, and then in these latter days has *spoken* to us by His Son" (cf. Heb. i, 1).

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PATRON AND ARTIST¹

THIS book consists of two lectures, the first on *The Normal View of Art*, the second on *Liberty and Discipline*. We wish it were possible to have them delivered and redelivered in every public place (not specially Art Schools) in the English-speaking world; for the principles they enunciate are precisely those which our civilization most completely flouts and most needs to know. Such a wish is, however, not only "crying for the moon," it would also be no more than "locking the stable after the horse has gone." It is much too late now to hope for any widespread and deliberate reform

¹ *Patron and Artist: Pre-Renaissance and Modern*, by A. K. Coomaraswamy and A. Graham Carey (Wheaton College Press, Norton, Mass.; \$1).