

# Revelation: Scripture or Tradition?

Louis Mahoney, O.P.

Christian unity was one of the goals of the recently concluded Ecumenical Council. Before this goal could be attained, Pope John XXIII realized that the Catholic Church would have to re-examine herself by clearing up misunderstandings which have served to block a possible dialogue with our "separated brethren." In the Council's first session, a document was introduced representing the fundamental problem of disunity—the sources of revelation. Pope John set the ecumenical tone of the Council by intervening and sending the document back to a committee for revision because of a general discontent concerning the first part of the document entitled "The Two Sources of Revelation." The very title suggests an equality between Scripture and tradition, the meaning of which has never been defined by the Church. A dialogue could hardly be expected to arise from a document which would tend to further alienate Protestants who accord the primacy to Scripture.

The problem of tradition was first discussed in the period immediately prior to the Reformation. Many religious practices within the Church, such as indulgences and the veneration of relics, were seemingly without a basis. Were these practices revealed by the Word of God? Or, did they spring up at a later date in the history of Christianity? Martin Luther solved the problem. He rendered all traditions as late upstarts, or human rather than divine in origin. The only source by which revelation is transmitted to us is scripture (*sola Scriptura*).

The Council of Trent reacted against the position or theory of *sola Scriptura*. In its defense of tradition as a valid source of revelation, the Council declared on April 8, 1546:

This truth and instruction are contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions, which have been received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or from the Apostles themselves, at the dictation of the Holy Spirit, have come down even to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand; (the Synod) following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, receives and holds in veneration with an equal affection of piety and reverence all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament, since one God is the author of both, and also the traditions themselves, those that appertain both to faith and morals, as having been dictated either by Christ's own word of mouth, or by the Holy Spirit, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession (Denz., No. 783)

Although this decree accomplished the refutation of the *sola Scriptura* position, it has suffered many diverse interpretations among Catholic theologians.

The original draft of the decree employed the formula which reflected the dominant pre-Tridentine theology. It read: ". . . that this truth is contained partly in written books, partly in unwritten traditions."<sup>1</sup> The use of this formula was primarily meant to emphasize a proper source of revelation outside of Scripture itself. The influence of nominalism, insisting on the separate existence of real things, left its mark on Tridentine theology.

A small minority, led by Nacchianti, Bishop of Chicoggia, questioned the proposed wording of the document. Nacchianti stated that no one is ignorant of the fact that Holy Writ contains everything necessary to salvation. Another bishop added that tradition is essentially only an authoritative interpretation of Scripture, not its equal. Shortly afterwards, the final draft was presented; it clearly indicated a compromise between the two positions. The "partly-partly" formula was dropped in favor of the single word "and." The final wording avoids an obvious parallelism of the two source theory; whereas, the initial wording indubitably divided the two. By this slight modification, the Council left the point undecided, allowing future theologians the opportunity to delve into the meaning of tradition.

Shortly after the conclusion of the Council, speculation concerning what the Fathers meant became the center of controversy. The impetus provided by these diverse opinions is even more acutely felt

today and is responsible for one of the most interesting discussions now in progress among Catholic scholars. There are two main questions being asked: did Trent mean that revelation came down to us through two sources independent of one another? Or on the other hand, did Trent wish to emphasize the classical view that Scripture contains all revealed truths, and that the Church's faith, which includes apostolic tradition, interprets it?

During the Counter-Reformation, various solutions were proposed. The common opinion immediately following the Council was determined by the influence of the *Loci theologici* of Melchior Cano, by the catechisms and theological writings of Canisius, and the *Controversies* of Bellarmine. All of these favored Scripture as a partial source of revelation, complemented by tradition. Thus, the document was interpreted in its original "partly-partly" formula. But it must be remembered that theology of this period was vehemently anti-Protestant. Consequently, when the Protestants stressed only one source, Catholics reacted by insisting on two separate sources. Theologians took the word "tradition" (which was not defined by Trent) to mean "the sum total of all the apostolic traditions, or at least the sum total of the revelation contained therein, and so transmitted to us in a non-Scriptural manner."<sup>2</sup> Because of the strength of this position, it has managed to survive the evolution of a clearer concept of tradition, and has managed to be influential among some Catholic theologians examining the problem today.

The dawning of a contemporary theology of tradition came at the time of the First Vatican Council and is associated with Cardinal Franzelin. The concept of tradition took on a broader scope to include not only the content, but more importantly, the very action whereby divine revelation is handed down within the Church. The importance of Franzelin is summed up by Walter Burghardt, who writes:

He distinguished, more clearly than had been done in the past, the active and objective aspects of tradition, and set in strong relief the role of the magisterium. Objective tradition is, for Franzelin, the doctrine transmitted; active tradition is the ensemble of acts and means whereby the doctrine is transmitted. The two aspects should be distinguished; they cannot be separated.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, there is now the notion of a living tradition, transmission, continuation of the message of Christ.

Prior to the development of this "new" concept, Protestant theologians were beginning to modify their doctrine by admitting that

Scripture did not contain all of revelation. They argued that the Church could only be understood if it were studied as it existed in the first four centuries. They said: "tradition was a vital thing; the faith was still in the people's hearts, not just written on paper. But with the passing of centuries the church had fallen away from its original vital source."<sup>54</sup> Although Catholic theologians did not agree with the Protestant claim of gradual defection, the argument did exert an influence by drawing Catholics to a better understanding of tradition.

For post-Franzelin contributors, such as Billot, active tradition was synonymous with the teaching activity of the bishops in union with the Pope, that is, the magisterium. Active tradition becomes the primary meaning of the activity of the magisterium. From this arose the "wholly-partly" idea—that the Word of God is partly in Scripture and totally in tradition. Geiselmann writes: "tradition is really twofold; it interprets Scripture, and it completes or adds to what Scripture says."<sup>55</sup> Still, this is not the ultimate or perfect concept in the evolutionary process.

Departing from the "wholly-partly" concept, an even fuller notion of tradition has developed. The roots of this understanding are found in the work of John Adam Mohler in the middle of the nineteenth century. Mohler accepted the "wholly-partly" concept and also the classical concept of tradition as a living thing—adding that it is living in the Church now as much as the Church of the early centuries. But he went one step further by breaking entirely with the idea that Scripture and tradition are two sources of God's revelation which stand side by side and never meet. Rather, the two penetrate each other, each giving to and receiving from the other. In other words, Scripture cannot be understood without understanding the development of doctrine in the Church, and vice versa. Scripture and tradition are dependent upon one another.

Mohler's position was developed further by his pupil John Baptist Kuhn. In its ultimate unfolding the notion might be called the "wholly-wholly" concept. Josef R. Geiselmann, a contemporary disciple and principal exponent of this concept, states that in his interpretation of Kuhn's final formulation:

In content, Scripture is perfect and complete. . . . Tradition has the function of interpreting a doctrinally complete Scripture. Scripture gives the principles, the starting points, or indications, which tradition explains and applies. . . . The word of God may be found in its

totality in the living tradition of the Church. All the revealed word of God is to be found in Sacred Scripture as interpreted by living tradition.<sup>6</sup>

This view is held by a growing number of eminent Catholic theologians. All revelation is contained in the Scriptures, at least in the sense that by the close of the apostolic era the substance of the Christian message would have found its way into the written and inspired accounts of the *kerygma* and *catechesis*. A reading of the Scripture in the historical context and spirit in which it was written allows the message to emerge. Therefore, these theologians do not find it difficult to maintain that tradition is essentially the interpreter of Scripture.

Among contemporary theologians, following in the trends established by Mohler and Kuhn, are such outstanding scholars as August Deneffe, Karl Rahner, P. A. Liege, O.P., M. Chenu, O.P., and J. Danielou. Father Rahner concludes an essay (in which he proposes a Catholic *sola Scriptura* solution based on his own concept of inspiration and on the unity of the object of faith) which expresses the open-mindedness of the new movement towards an understanding of tradition. He writes:

Please beg the Holy Spirit of God to guide the Church to leave the whole question open at the Second Vatican Council. We do not expect and should not expect the Church to go beyond the present stage of clarification of its faith-consciousness and take our side. It is completely sufficient if the Church says again what it said in the Council of Trent: Scripture and tradition are two elements of the one transmission of faith. Then we theologians and the future faith-consciousness of the Church can consider from a better vantage point in the next decades or centuries how to determine the exact relationship of these two elements. Let us hope that this is how things will turn out.<sup>7</sup>

Rahner's plea for a non-conclusive statement from the Conciliar Fathers was heard. In the decree on the sources of revelation, the leap to the "wholly-wholly" theory is not taken. However, an approach is made in the decree toward clarifying and unveiling the concept rather than merely restating the affirmation of Trent. The co-ordination and interplay of Scripture, tradition, and the magisterium are especially emphasized by the tenth article of the decree. The concluding paragraph to this section reads:

It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise

design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.

Certainly, this represents a much clearer concept, and at the same time, is capable of further development.

The first reactions to the document were not long in coming. Gabriel Moran feels it has unveiled a more fundamental question than the Scripture-tradition controversy raises. Moran attempts to avoid favoring any previous theory and hopes, in the final analysis, to reconcile the long disputed relationship of the two elements of revelation. Past theologians generally overlooked the investigation of the nature of revelation itself; but "the rethinking of the revelational process has undercut the Scripture-tradition question and focused upon the underlying difficulties."<sup>8</sup> For Moran, revelation is "the intersubjective experience of God and the human community brought to full intensity in the God-man and being brought to participated perfection in the rest of men."<sup>9</sup>

God revealed His salvific message to man in an evolutionary process, culminating in the sending of His Son. Now man is gradually evolving a clearer notion of the nature of His revelation. With the impetus provided by Vatican II, the theology of revelation may finally receive the respect and attention which was lacking in a less Ecumenical age.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Josef Rupert Geiselmann, "Scripture and Tradition in Catholic Theology," *Theology Digest* VI (Winter, 1958), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Wilfrid F. Dewan, "Tradition Is a Living Message," *Catholic World*, 197-1180 (July, 1963), p. 240.

<sup>3</sup> Walter J. Burghardt, "The Catholic Concept of Tradition in the Light of Modern Theological Thought," *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America* (Detroit, 1951), pp. 59-60.

<sup>4</sup> Geiselmann, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Rahner, "Scripture and Tradition," *Theology Digest* XII (Spring, 1964), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel Moran, *Theology of Revelation* (New York, 1966), p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.