

Some Theses for Discussion on the Dogmatic Constitution De Revelatione of the Second Vatican Council

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ABSTRACT

While mirroring our own twin concern for a high doctrine of biblical inspiration and modern biblical studies, the Vatican II document "De Revelatione" also mirrors our own dilemma less of scripture vs. confession (tradition) than that third alternative, traditioning scripture. The Council's document, however, while surmounting past intellectualism in favor of the historical and personal, does little to address what Trent more fully did: justification. Thus, while missing then the biblical distinction between judgment and promise (and thus missing biblical soteriology), the document leads to a danger not unlike our own: to turn biblical revelation itself into a soteriology as if obedience to revelation itself were what God intends for our salvation. Thus, in critiquing the Vatican document on revelation for that implicit danger, we may have to face the same among ourselves, especially in what we have to say "concerning revelation." (Stephen C. Krueger)

1. For members of the LC-MS the *de Revelatione* is a mirror, an X-ray mirror. It reflects not only what we already are but what incipiently we are becoming, for good as well as for ill.

2. Take Chapters III ("The Divine Inspiration and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture"), IV ("The Old Testament") and V ("The New Testament"). Barring the one or two isolated references in these chapters to the interpretative authority of the church—"...interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church" (111,12)—they are probably a better statement than anything we have yet been able to come up with on a comparable level of synodical action, combining as they do a high doctrine of biblical inspiration with honest encouragement of modern biblical studies.

3. As for that objectionable doctrine about the church's *magisterium*, described mostly in Chapter II ("The Transmission of Divine Revelation"), our objections should at least be cautious. For example, this statement, "The task of authentically interpreting the word of God...has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church..." should at least be read in light of its sequel: "This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to devoutly...explaining it faithfully...with the help of the Holy Spirit." (II,10) Moreover, a statement like this in behalf of "sacred tradition," "it is not from sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed," might almost be a description of our own practices, not as they ought to be but as in fact they often are.

4. Even when we are as we ought to be, that is, confessional, we find ourselves suddenly athwart a dilemma which resembles, though it dare not duplicate, Rome's: namely, the dilemma of scripture and/or confessions. We would duplicate Rome's dilemma (as not only Rome but most of Protestant biblicism does) if we assumed simply that the choice is between scripture-without-tradition and scripture-plus-tradition. If for Lutherans, at least, *sola scriptura* implies a third alternative, (call it the

“traditioning scripture”) then this in turn warrants our looking at those theologians at Vatican II who argued for a “one source” theory. *De Revelatione* does not, at least, exclude that possibility. (See MacKenzie’s optimistic footnotes 15 and 21, Abbott, pp. 115,117.)

5. *De Revelatione* reflects a heroic effort, as do more and more statements in our own midst, to correct an overly intellectualistic notion of revelation by means of two biblical categories which have again come into their own: the historical and the personal. Not only in the chapters on the Old and New Testaments but especially in the first chapter (“Revelation Itself”) is the entire orientation *heilsgeschichtlich* and the goal of all God’s revealing is to reveal God himself. This, if any one thing is, is the theme of *De Revelatione*, and it is clear from all this that Pius XII’s *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and, behind that, Cardinal Bea’s Pontifical Biblical Commission and, behind that, modern Protestant biblical studies have exerted a lasting influence on the dogma of the Roman Church.

6. There is one influence, however, which Vatican II does not reflect, at least not the way Trent did—for example, in its sixth session (*de Iustificatione*). And that is the influence of Augsburg, with its Augustana and its Apology. What I mean is that there is not at Vatican II, as there was at Trent, any ambitious attempt to come to terms with questions of what traditionally were called soteriology. Still, on second thought, maybe that is the role which Vatican II assigns to *De Revelatione*. That is, in Rome too, revelation might well have become the surrogate for salvation. Or, in other words, the question of salvation has been reduced to the question of authority. The reason men must believe the revelation, their “authority” for believing it, is that it is God who does the revealing – and, as that point is now intensified by the new personalism, it is God himself who gets revealed. That all

sounds plausible enough, except... Except what? Except that that reason, that authority – namely, the divine authorship – might then become our reason for believing everything which God reveals, his judgment as well as his promise. They both become credible for the same reason: because God said so. And consequently, “faith” then means accepting the judgment as well as the promise and, before long, is simply defined as “obedience.” And the assumption grows that anything which God reveals is for that reason saving, whether his wrath or his mercy. Or, more likely, God no longer is thought to have anything like real wrath. And all that God’s mercy any longer saves men from is–themselves. Then see what has happened to the distinctiveness, the bold newness, of the gospel. But that, in fact, is the at least implicit soteriology of *De Revelatione*, in essentials similar to Trent. And that disaster, at least in my glummer moments, I could predict also for that other “sacred Synod” which I love the most. But I’d rather not.

7. On the other hand, if this soteriology of *De Revelatione* is so far only implicit, that may be ground for gratitude. It may well be that the churches in this moment of their history are in too weakened a condition to promulgate any soteriologies explicitly–any, that is, except the wrong ones. May we have the good sense to be equally self-restrained, also in what new things we say *de Revelatione*, at least until we regain our Strength.

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