

# Introduction to Revelation

The concepts of natural revelation and Divine Revelation come up in every course in the Living in Christ series. This is because accepting that God reveals himself to us means accepting a truth that is fundamental to all catechesis and theology. *Theology* is literally the “discussion or study of God.” If we start with the premise that God is the “wholly other,” then we can logically conclude that if God did not choose to reveal himself, there would be no theology and no religion. God must first reach out and embrace us before we can know and embrace God.

Further, the study of Revelation is important in helping us to avoid false understandings of God. We must understand how we come to know the truth about God in order to discern between competing claims about who God is and what he wills. For example, some people believe there are no divinely inspired sources of Revelation. Muslims believe the Qur’an is the only divinely inspired source that authentically communicates God’s Revelation (and that it corrects errors that occur in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures). Many Protestant Christians believe the Bible is the only divinely inspired way God’s Revelation is communicated to human beings. Each of these beliefs about Revelation will ultimately lead to different understandings of God.

The Catholic teaching is that God reveals himself both through the created order and through unique, divinely inspired modalities. The former is commonly called natural revelation and the latter Divine Revelation. Natural revelation is ongoing, is available to all, is experienced through the gifts of creation and intellect, and can provide profound personal encounters with God. It can also be misleading and can be misused. Divine Revelation is found particularly in salvation history, is fulfilled or completed in Jesus Christ, and is authentically communicated only through Scripture and Tradition. Divine Revelation is safeguarded by the Magisterium, and all Christians have the responsibility to share it with others by our words and actions. We will look more closely first at Divine Revelation and then at natural revelation.

## Divine Revelation

**(See also *Catechism*, 50–100)**

Divine Revelation is God’s definitive self-communication, through which he makes known the mystery of his divine plan of salvation. The process of Divine Revelation has proceeded gradually throughout human history, beginning with Adam and Eve and culminating in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Divine Revelation is communicated through Scripture and Tradition for all of humanity to know and understand.

The symbolism in the accounts of the Garden of Eden teach that God revealed himself intimately and immediately to our first parents; this is the meaning of the Genesis accounts. Adam and Eve initially experienced God fully and naturally without anything hindering their loving relationship with him. In catechetical language we say they experienced full and perfect “communion” with God. However, Adam and Eve’s sin and its consequences—which we call “the Fall”—changed this relationship. The original and natural revelation that Adam and Eve enjoyed continues today through creation, intellect, and relationships. But creation, our intellect, and our relationships are scarred by human sin. Thus we know and understand God in less intimate and immediate ways than he originally intended.

So after the Fall, God enacted his wondrous plan of salvation, his plan to bring humanity back into full communion with him. In the Old Testament, we learn how God intentionally revealed himself and his plan for salvation through the covenants he made with his Chosen People and through the prophets he



sent to them. His Chosen People, in turn, were to be a light to the world, proclaiming God's truth to all the nations.

God's plan for salvation was thwarted time and again by human sin, until it was perfectly fulfilled when he walked among us once again as the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, we learn how God, as Christ, reveals himself to humanity intimately, immediately, and completely. All of Christ's words and actions are revelatory. In particular, his death, Resurrection, and Ascension reveal to us the fullness of God's love through the Paschal Mystery, the heart of God's plan for our salvation.

All Revelation is Trinitarian, the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But in a particular way, it was the work of the Holy Spirit to inspire and guide the Apostles to remember and teach all that they had learned from Christ. We call their teaching the apostolic Tradition, or just Tradition. Though the divine truths of Tradition are unchanging, our understanding of them has deepened as the Holy Spirit guides the Church into all truth, particularly through the teaching of the Magisterium. This has led at times to the announcement of new doctrines, such as the Immaculate Conception of Mary (officially promulgated in 1854) or the infallibility of the Pope (officially promulgated in 1870). These doctrines are not new in the sense that they were not previously true—they are only new in the sense that, although they were present in nascent form since the Apostles, they only reached our full understanding in later times.

The Holy Spirit also inspired the Apostles and their followers to write the Gospels, letters, sermons, and apocalyptic literature that are the books of the New Testament. We call this biblical inspiration, the divine assistance the Holy Spirit gave to the authors of the books of the Bible, both Old and New Testament, so they could communicate in human words all that God wanted to reveal for the sake of our salvation. The Scriptures flow from the apostolic Tradition because the New Testament is based on the witness of the Apostles, and the Old Testament books were approved and used by Jesus and the Apostles. Both Scripture and Tradition are guided by the same Spirit, and thus they have the same source. Scripture and Tradition are the two authentic modes of transmitting the unity of Divine Revelation, which we also sometimes refer to as the Deposit of Faith.

There are some things to keep in mind when discussing Divine Revelation. The Church does not describe Scripture and Tradition as “sources” of divine truth. God alone is the source of truth. Instead we describe Scripture and Tradition as two modes (or ways) that God's truth is revealed (or transmitted or taught) to us. Scripture and Tradition are very important, but they are not important for their own sakes. They are important only because they are uniquely able to teach us the truth that God wants us to know for our salvation.

## Natural Revelation

**(See also *Catechism*, 27–49)**

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* discusses natural revelation in the sections on “The Desire for God” (see 27–30) and “Ways of Coming to Know God” (see 31–35). In this discussion the *Catechism* describes an inwardly focused dimension of natural revelation and an outwardly focused dimension of natural revelation. Let's look briefly at these two dimensions, knowing there is much more that could be said about them.

The inward dimension of natural revelation is experienced primarily through human reflection. For example, we recognize in ourselves various hungers: the hunger for knowledge, the hunger for



intimacy, the hunger for beauty, and so on. In our pursuit of these things, we often realize we are never quite satisfied—there is something more, some perfect expression of knowledge, beauty, and intimacy just out of our grasp. And in our hearts we understand that these things only reflect the absolute truth, beauty, and love that is God. Or we have this experience: We learn some great truth, create some object of great beauty, or experience deep intimacy in a relationship, and in our hearts we know these things are gifts. And we recognize that the giver of those gifts is God.

The outward expression of natural revelation is experienced in the things and creatures that make up creation. Through our intellect we see the order in creation and recognize that this order was created by God. Or we see the vastness and power in creation and recognize that something bigger and more powerful is responsible for it. Or we see the extravagant beauty and diversity present in the world's creatures and recognize a creator who is in love with beauty and diversity. We see tenderness, compassion, and heroic sacrifice in human relationships, and we know these things are possible only because human beings are channeling the love of God.

The reality of natural revelation has been described in many ways throughout human history. The *Jesus Christ* student book and teacher guide describe natural revelation as knowing God in our daily lives, in the faith of others, through the natural world, and through human intellect. This schema is simply an alternate way to describe how natural revelation occurs. You will notice that these descriptions still reflect both the inwardly focused dimension and the outwardly focused dimension of natural revelation discussed in the *Catechism*.

## Church Fathers on Revelation

In general the Church Fathers did not have a highly developed theology of Revelation. They presumed the concept of natural revelation was understood by most people. This presumption arose in large part because of the influence of Greek philosophy in the Latin world. We have the earliest recorded descriptions of natural revelation as a philosophical concept from the ancient Greeks. It can be found as early as the writings of Aristotle in fourth century BC. Thus Origen, writing around AD 225, says this about natural revelation:

Although no one, certainly, is able to speak worthily of God the Father, it is nevertheless possible for some knowledge of Him to be obtained by means of visible creatures and from those things which the human mind naturally senses: and it is possible, moreover, for such knowledge to be confirmed by the Sacred Scriptures.

*(The Fundamental Doctrines, 1, 3, 1)*

The Fathers also emphasized that human reason could easily be led astray: hence the necessity of supernatural, or divine, Revelation. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem around AD 350 says this very clearly:

In regard to the divine and holy mysteries of the faith, not the least part may be handed on without the Holy Scriptures. Do not be led astray by winning words and clever arguments. Even to me, who tell you these things, do not give ready belief, unless you receive from the Holy Scriptures the proof of the things which I announce. The salvation in which we believe is proved not from clever reasoning, but from the Holy Scriptures.

*(Catechetical Lectures, 4, 17)*



And this excerpt from Saint Epiphanius of Salamis, written in AD 377, emphasized the complementarity of Scripture and Tradition:

It is not necessary that all the divine words have an allegorical meaning. Consideration and perception is needed in order to know the meaning of the argument of each. It is needful also to make use of Tradition; for not everything can be gotten from Sacred Scripture. The holy Apostles handed down some things in the Scriptures, other things in Tradition.

(*Panacea Against All Heresies*, 61, 60)

## ***Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation***

The most recent infallible ecclesial document on Revelation is the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in 1965. This document is a must-read for anyone teaching theology; for a Church document, it is relatively short and easy to understand. Here are a few important points made by *Dei Verbum*:

1. Revelation is God's self-communication, a freely given and loving invitation into a relationship of friendship and communion with the Holy Trinity; to actually share in the divine nature. This self-revelation has a content that is summarized as the "deposit of faith" (2, 10).
2. The divine self-revelation is centered on and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is both the revealer and the revealed (2, 4).
3. The Revelation in Christ reaches its full climax not in his Incarnation but in the Paschal Mystery: his Passion, death, and Resurrection (4).
4. Revelation calls each human person to respond in faith to God's invitation to be in friendship with him. This response is not just intellectual; it is a response of the whole person (5).
5. Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church are intrinsically linked, so that one cannot stand without the others (10).

These points are only a small taste of the richness of *Dei Verbum*. It covers many other topics, including the transmission of Divine Revelation, the inspiration and interpretation of the Scriptures, the content of the Old and New Testaments, and the role that Sacred Scripture is to play in the life of the Church.

## **Bibliography**

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