

INTRODUCTION TO CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

A seminar for beginners

REVELATION

FAITH

THEOLOGY

CREED



Written by John Thornhill sm
Designed and produced by Patrick Lim

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This brief presentation takes place before the main presentation of the first session of the seminar, with its own title.

Introducing the themes of the seminar

The themes of the seminar – Revelation, Faith, Theology and Creed – are introduced and their inter-relation explained through a comparison with the on-going development of marriage relationship.

This comparison is suggested by the Scriptures. (Cf. *New Jerusalem Bible*, Table of Major Footnotes, under “Bride: Israel as bride of Yahweh; Church as bride of Christ”).

The main presentation of this session now begins with its own title.

SESSION 1

Revelation: The dynamic origin of the Judeo-Christian Movement

1. Revelation: once taken for granted, explained by recent theology.

Christian faith presupposes truths which could only be known because they have been revealed by God. Many things are so fundamental that they are taken for granted. While the whole of Europe was Christian revelation was taken for granted, and theologians gave little attention to explaining how Revelation took place.

This had to change when the Enlightenment movement of the modern period began to question the fundamental assumptions of Christianity. A long and complex discussion has since clarified the nature of the process in which revelation has taken place. The consensus that emerged is reflected in Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum*.

See Dermot Lane, "The Nature of Revelation" in *The Experience of God: An Invitation to Theology*; R. McBrien, "Revelation: God's Self-disclosure to us" in *Catholicism*; G. O'Collins' discussion of *Dei verbum* in *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*.

What has emerged can best be appreciated by considering the origins of the Judeo-Christian movement – origins which have produced the most influential movement in the history of humanity. These origins were understood by those involved as an encounter between the living God with members of the human family. This encounter:

1. Made those involved aware of a decision of God with far-reaching consequences
2. It took place through historical events in which they were involved
3. Through it they were caught up in a personal relationship with God.

These implications indicate three elements that must be acknowledged in the revelation process:

1. Revelation is the communication of certain truths

2. Revelation takes place through the events of "Salvation History"
3. Revelation involves a personal response of the recipients (cf. "covenant")

Revelation can be described, therefore as a dialogical encounter realised through historical events.

2. Revelation through "Salvation History"

The phrase "Salvation History" gives expression to the dimensions of the revelation process we have identified. This concept is recognised today as of fundamental importance for theology.

"History" can refer to two different things: 1) the events of the past; 2) a record describing events of the past. Both of these understandings are involved in the notion of "Salvation History". We can sum up the implications of "Salvation History", therefore, as follows: historical events (deeds) were interpreted (in words) by the People of God, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; and, after a period of oral transmission, these traditions were preserved in the Sacred Scriptures. (Today, theologians judge that the "inspiration" of the Holy Spirit which guided the formation of this fundamental code of Judeo-Christian faith was present in all phases of this process.)

(For more on "Salvation History", see *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, under "Salvation History": Essay 70, Old Testament Thought, nn140-143; Essay 34, Psalms; Essay 44, Acts, n 5; Essay 70, New Testament Criticism, n 57 on the authoritative work of O. Cullmann ("*key to the New Testament*").

John L. McKenzie sums up well the conclusions of contemporary scholarship: "Israel had a concept of history; when we examine the concept, it turns out to be the fruit of what we would call a theology of history. The unity and continuity of the historical process comes from Israel's recognition of itself, not only as a people but as the people of Yahweh. Its history is the history of its encounter with Yahweh and its response to the encounter. Its interest is cosmic because there is only one God and one historical process, a development through crisis, a development in which Yahweh is more clearly recognised in His true reality. History tends to a term [i.e. end point]; it is not the mere chronicle of the Mesopotamians nor the recurring cycle of the Greeks. The purpose of Israel, which spoke through its story-tellers, was to present a true picture of the reality of God operating in history and of man's response", *Dictionary of the Bible*, pp 362-63.

As the literature of the People of God, the Scriptures have a variety of literary forms, including imaginative forms such as fiction and legend for example. The unifying principle of this literature, however, is an outlook which is in complete contrast with the mythological outlook of other ancient peoples, a conviction that God was at work in the events of a "salvation history", a series of historical events which they recalled as contributing to the ongoing saga of their relationship with God and his designs. (See Robert Alter, a Jewish scholar, and G. Von Rad, a Dominican scholar of the Old Testament, cited in John Thornhill, *Christian Mystery in the Secular Age*, pp 33-37.)

Mythology has had an important place in the cultural traditions of humanity. As peoples endeavoured to

come to terms with the challenges and ambiguities of human existence, they have sought an explanation in the actions of the gods they worshipped. As we shall see, there is a radical contrast between the understanding of human destiny found in the revelation of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the mythologies of other peoples.

3. The revolutionary message of Salvation History

We Christians, as the People of God whose faith is shaped by Salvation History, should – as we recall the story of the Scriptures – enter into the experience of the first recipients of revelation.

The Exodus (during the 13th century BC)

Under the leadership of Moses, a group of people found freedom. They came to understand this as the work of God, the Champion of the oppressed, who established a covenant with them as his chosen people, called to make God's ways known to the whole world – the ways of the one true God, very different from the ways of the gods worshipped by other peoples. The gods of the mythologies were projections of human imagining and ideals. The God of the Judeo-Christian tradition's revelation overturned these imaginings. The ways of the one true God revealed in Salvation History challenged the "static triumphalism" of the pagan gods, upholding the status quo of the societies that had created them. Israel's God was concerned for the little people of the human story, offering them the hope of life shaped by justice and freedom. (See Walter

Brueggemann, cited, John Thornhill, *Christian Mystery in the Secular Age*, pp 42-43).

“God hears the cry of the poor” was to become a refrain in the traditions of God’s people. Ultimately, God’s self-expression in Salvation History was to be given in the life and death and resurrection of the poor man from Nazareth, who “came not to be served but to serve”.

The Prophets of old Israel

The role of Moses in the foundational revelation of Salvation History can hardly be exaggerated. He was the Chosen People’s “paradigmatic prophet” (Brueggemann). He fostered the faith awareness essential to this foundational revelation – in a manner that can only have been realised through the presence of the Spirit of God.

Prophets, it should be recognised, are more than seers who can foretell the future; they are seers who speak in the name of God, helping God’s people to recognise God’s active presence in their midst, what that presence is teaching them and calling them to – in a word, helping them to learn the ways of God. As the history of the Chosen People unfolded – a very human story, marked by infidelities and failure – the prophets called the people back to fidelity to the covenant with God they had entered into. As a consequence, the prophets’ teachings – as a kind of “conscience” of God’s people – became an important component of the traditions of Israel.

Defeat and Exile in Babylon (6th century BC)

A small nation, surrounded by powerful rival empires, Israel eventually suffered a terrible ordeal and trial. This led, however, to a renewed faith and growing expectations of the future God would share with them. It was in this climate that the Old Testament Scriptures, as we know them, were put together.

Centuries of frustration under occupying powers

This long period is the prelude to the coming of Christ, producing the atmosphere in which he carried out his mission.

Salvation History's final climax in the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth

The Paschal Mystery of the Saviour brought the fulfilment of old Israel's boundless expectations. The shadows of the era of anticipation have given way to the final achievement promised by God.

We live in the final moment of Salvation History

The Word of God incarnate is the full self-disclosure of God and of the ways of God. We, members of the Christian Church (the "first fruits" of God's redeemed humanity) must carry forward the work of the Saviour, bringing the Good News of this fulfilment to the peoples of all the ages to come.

(The Emmaus Series DVD "Making Good Sense of the Scriptures" gives a more detailed account of the biblical material.)

SESSION 2

Faith: Our response to Revelation

1. Faith is a response

What we have seen, discussing revelation, provides the essential background for an understanding of the nature of Christian faith.

An encounter with the on-going action of God in human history brings to the recipients of revelation an awareness that they are being caught up in a relationship with the living God which changes their lives; as they become involved in the carrying forward of God's mysterious designs

Faith is the responsive awareness of those to whom revelation is made. How is this awareness and response possible? Clearly, it can only be made through an openness to enlightenment that is a gift of God.

Dermot Lane, in the work we have already referred to, neatly sums up the relationship of mutuality between REVELATION and FAITH:

“There can be no divine revelation without the response of faith which receives it; and there can be no faith without the grace of God's revelation which draws forth faith in us”. (The Experience of God: An Invitation to Do Theology, p.38)

2. Faith is a gift (a “grace”)

Lane refers to a fundamental concept of Christian theology, “grace”, an order of gifts that are outside the innate potential of our human “nature”.

It is worth discussing the relationship between Grace and Nature, because, as we shall see, this will help us understand better how faith works in our personal lives. Another theologian, Denis Edwards, has pointed out, in his introduction to the discussion of Grace, that experiences of something coming to us as a free gift – as something experienced as beyond our expectation and hopes are not uncommon.

This can come about through positive experiences – for instance, CHILDBIRTH, INTERPERSONAL LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP, CREATIVITY, FORGIVENESS, and THE BEAUTY OF NATURE AND LIFE in their many forms.

Paradoxically, the unexpected development of a new dimension in our existence can also come through the negative experiences of limit situations – for instance, VULNERABILITY, DEATH, FAILURE, LONLINESS and ALIENATION.

*(See Denis Edwards, *The Human Experience of God*, pp 27-38.)*

3. “Grace” and “Nature”

Reflecting on the examples suggested by Denis Edwards makes it clear that it is not easy to determine the dividing line between experiences that are within our natural capacities and those which are only possible through God’s gift. It also points to the fact that, in our

day to day life, experiences that are within our natural capacities can open the way to responses that involve God's gift of Grace.

In his influential work, *Begin with the Heart*, Daniel O'Leary discusses the practical importance of a sound understanding of the relationship between the workings of Grace and Nature in our lives.

As a background to what O'Leary has to say, we should bear in mind that in the long history of Catholic thought fashions of emphasis have changed many times. There has been an ebb and flow, as different theological emphases have influenced the outlook of Catholics.

In the period prior to Vatican II's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*, O'Leary points out, Catholic thought tended to see Grace and Nature as establishing "two different worlds, one sacred and one profane", suggesting the image of a two-storey house. For this outlook, the workings of Nature and Grace were sharply separated. And this produced a pessimistic view of life; existing on the level of Nature, the Christian's existence was seen as a constant struggle against the sinfulness, which tended to follow the confused promptings of Nature; and "salvation", the work of Grace, was seen as a "Divine rescue mission" from this precarious situation. Though this description is really a caricature of the best thought of the time, it captures well the outlook of many of our Catholic people during the period.

Today, it is recognised that the history of Catholic thought makes it clear that this outlook was very different from that of the Fathers of the early Church,

and that of the great medieval theologians – a theology that is now being recovered. The teaching of Vatican II reflects this recovery.

The Council's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World opened up magnificent horizons, with its optimistic understanding of our humanity (i.e. human nature) made in the image of God:

"The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of the human person become understood"

In other words, every human existence follows the pattern given to the world in the life the Son of God who came and made himself one of us. This important text goes on to extend this optimistic view to the whole human family:

"since the destiny of humanity is one and divine, this holds true, not only for Christians, but for all men and women of good will in whose hearts Grace works in an unseen way" (*Gaudium et spes*, n 22)

Of course, the dynamisms of Grace and Nature are essentially different. But, as the teaching of the Council indicates, this distinction does not set them in opposition to one another, and does not prevent their being intimately associated throughout the life of every human person. In the much quoted words of St Augustine, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts will not find rest until they rest in you". We are made in the image of God; in the depths of our nature there is an openness, and deep yearnings, that

the generous designs of God (made clear for us in the Incarnate Son) will fulfil.

For Daniel O’Leary, a wholesome catechesis will make Christians alive to the workings of God’s grace in the many moods and experiences of their lives. He writes, for example:

- ◆ “All students carry a memory in their hearts ... the longing they carry for completion is God’s own longing inscribed in their souls from the beginning”.
- ◆ “ ‘Experience’ ... constitutes the existential condition for God’s saving action to be revealed in every detail of our lives”.
- ◆ “The graced unfolding of our lives is God’s dream within us becoming true’. (Begin with the Heart, pp 105, 115, 163)

4. The Faith of a full Christian life

It is clear, from what we have seen, that the response of an authentic Christian faith involves far more than assent to certain truths. The teaching of the Scriptures alerts us to this.

Jesus is remembered in the gospels as often speaking of “faith” when praising the response of those for whom he worked miracles. Walter Kasper sums up what this “faith” implied – for Jesus, “faith” was openness to a meeting with Salvation History:

“Faith is an openness to something other, something new, something to come ... It is a description of the essence of faith to say : faith is participation in the omnipotence of God ... Faith is existence in receptivity and obedience”. (*Jesus the Christ*, pp 81-82)

St Paul’s understanding of “faith” expressed the same openness to the action of God. Lucien Cerfaux summarises this understanding:

“An intervention of God in His Son is accessible to us ... and faith is the corresponding human attitude ... the foundation of the new order [inaugurated by God’s intervention]”. (*The Spiritual Journey of St Paul*, pp 124-25)

The link with what we have heard from O’Leary is not difficult to recognise. Our personal life of faith involves an openness and an availability to the active presence of God in our lives.

Vatican II’s *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* reminds us of the seriousness of what this implies:

“... the split between the faith that many profess and their daily lives must be counted among the more serious aberrations of our age”. (*Gaudium et spes*, n 43)

Thomas Groome sums up these implications: an authentic Christian faith should have three constitutive elements:

1. Belief convictions about the things of God
2. A trusting relationship with God
3. A response to God's call to loving service in our world

With regard to belief convictions, Groome points out that, in the biblical tradition "knowledge" is more than an affair of "the head"; it is especially an affair of "the heart". "Knowing the Lord" for Christian faith is entering into the Church's response as the "Bride of Christ", a loving sharing in all that Jesus stands for.

This knowledge, for Groome, therefore leads to a trust that inspires, wonder and awe, reverence and adoration, gratitude, and a readiness to entrust ourselves into the merciful love of God.

And finally, as it brings an awareness of God's designs for humanity, this vital faith recognises that it involves a call to the loving service that is the "incarnation" of our faith.

(See Groome, [Christian Education: Sharing our Story and Vision](#), ch 4, pp 57-64)

(For more on what is covered in this session, see [John Thornhill, Christian Mystery in the Secular Age](#), ch 2, pp 35-45.)

SUPPLEMENT TO SESSION 2

Viewing of Emmaus Series DVD, "*Stages of Faith Experience*"

STAGES OF FAITH EXPERIENCE

James Fowler has made a developmental study of the phases through which people pass in their life of faith. For Fowler, 'faith' in a broad sense – an interpretative system that gives meaning and coherence to one's world – is essential to every normal human life.

Fowler's identification of the stages through which a person passes sheds light on the experience of Christian believers at different stages of life. It is not the faith that changes, but the way in which believers perceive the things of faith, as they bring new resources to their awareness. We look at the same thing through a series of 'lenses', as Fowler puts it.

Many factors contribute to a person's resources. However one factor seems fundamental – the social horizons in which a person lives. The six 'stages' Fowler identifies are readily understood when related to these changing social horizons. We shall use the terminology suggested by Marcellin Flynn, which is more straightforward than that suggested by Fowler.

Stage 1: Experienced Faith (3/4 – 6/7)

At this stage, the child's effective world is shaped by family life. The child identifies with the religious attitudes experienced in the family, which can make a profound impression. The child has no functional awareness of other ways.

Stage 2: Affiliative Faith (6/7 – 11/12)

The child is now aware of a broader group of 'people like us' (our tribe, as it were), and identifies with what is conveyed by the stories and rituals of this larger group. The child is aware that there are 'people not like us', but their ways have no effective impact on their outlook.

Stage 3: Conventional Faith (11/12 – may continue into the 20s)

The young person is now aware of the institutions that provide the setting of their lives; they are conscious of rules and paradoxically (deep down) find security in a predictable pattern of life, adopting uniform dress etc. For Christians at this stage life in the Church is like a big parade (hierarchical, regulated, liking uniforms etc.).

Stage 4: Personal, Searching Faith (Adolescence to Maturity)

People at this stage have become effectively aware that they live in a world in which competing voices claim to provide answers to life's questions. Among these, 'significant others' are shaping their lives. Aware that they are responsible for the personal attitudes that are expressed in their lives, they are no longer happy to be carried along by the big organisation to which they belong. This is an uncomfortable stage, in which the need for security in the attitudes they have adopted inclines them to be intolerant and given to black and white solutions. At this stage, people must recognise and look critically at the 'significant others' in their lives.

(Personally, I found my way forward at this stage, not by reading and discussion, but by coming to recognise people – of my experience, or from the past – who have ‘looked Christ in the eye’ as someone put it, and shaped their lives by what they have found.)

Stage 5: Community Faith (rare before maturity)

At this stage, social awareness embraces the whole human family. Secure in their beliefs, people at this stage feel a genuine fellowship with other people and traditions and move beyond ‘sectarian’ attitudes, open to learning from other points of view. For them life is like a pilgrimage; they know that they do not have all the answers, and they journey with fellow humans towards the fullness of life and truth.

Stage 6: Universal Faith (exceptional)

Fowler suggested as examples: Pope John XXIII, Gandhi, Mother Teresa. These people see the world through God’s eyes. They bring people together with a lived message of inspiration and hope.

Some comments

As I describe these stages, I realise that I am drawing on my own experience in yesterday’s very different world. In today’s world, social forces are more complex and pervasive. Basically, however, these stages must be worked through as each person’s life moves into expanding social horizons.

1. The stages form a natural sequence, each building on what went before; each has its own achievement and 'grace' Fowler comments.
2. The stages are not an achievement scale. A person's worth is not determined by the stage they have reached, but by the depth of their commitment to what is true and good. A great saint may in childhood be a far greater person according to this scale than a very cultivated theologian.
3. In the course of history to this point, most people have lives at stage 2 or stage 3. Today's world pushes many people into Stage 4.
4. People do not move to a new stage overnight but may hover on the margin for some time. Growth is helped by consciously reflecting on what is attractive in the next stage.

The best way to find the authenticity of Christian faith is to 'try it out'. Identify what Christ stood for and make it the measure of your life. It may be challenging, but it will never be found wanting, and the more it is made your own the more it will bring a sense of personal fulfilment which has no equal.

SESSION 3

Theology: The explorations of a living faith

1. “Faith seeking understanding”

St Anselm of Canterbury (d.1190) has given us the much quoted definition of theology, “Faith seeking understanding”. Theology is essential to the life of the Church, clarifying the content of revelation, and interpreting its implications in the life of believers of successive generations. All intelligent Christians who reflect upon their faith have begun to theologise in an informal way. In this presentation we consider theology as a formal intellectual discipline.

Theology, it should be stressed at the outset, is a work of faith; faith makes use of the resources of human thought available, in its work of interpretation.

Theology presupposes the truths of faith, and carries out its investigation in the light of faith. Great theology has always been the work of believers with a vital faith.

In the modern period, as Christian faith was confronted by an outlook that rejected its basic principles, some theologians have been tempted to turn the theological process up-side-down. “Liberal” theology, as it has been called, has proposed interpretations of Christian doctrines that would have them conform to the fashions of human thought. (John Henry Newman, the 19th century English cardinal who made a significant contribution to modern theology, was aware of this tendency and strongly opposed it.)

2. A task with three phases

What we have already seen in our discussion of revelation and faith makes it clear that the task of theology is immense. It involves, in fact, three distinct phases of investigation:

1. An interpretation, in the first place, of the Biblical Literature, and next, an understanding of the lived expressions of Christian faith down through the ages, as they are found:
 - a. In the Church's common life
 - b. In the work of theologians
 - c. In the authoritative teaching of the Church

This phase is called POSITIVE THEOLOGY

2. A critical analysis and evaluation of the work of Christian thinkers down through the ages.

This phase is called SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

3. Studies in the practical implementation of the mission and life of the Church

This phase is called PASTORAL THEOLOGY

In each of these phases, faith calls upon different orders of resources:

- ◆ Positive Theology uses historical and literary criticism
- ◆ Systematic Theology uses philosophical analysis
- ◆ Pastoral Theology uses cultural, social and psychological disciplines.

3. Positive Theology's various forms

The inspired writings of the Scriptures are fundamental in any understanding of the content of revelation. Today's historical scholarship has shed much light on the formation of the Scriptures, and on the intentions of the many authors involved.

Textual criticism seeks to identify the original text.

Literary criticism interprets the intention of the authors by identifying the historical contexts that shaped the preoccupations of the authors, and by identifying the literary form (factual reporting in its various forms, fictional narratives etc.), whether of the work as a whole, or of earlier material that has been made use of by the author. In this work form criticism identifies typical patterns that have developed in the biblical traditions which shed light on their intended meaning. Form criticism has shed much light on the gospel texts by identifying units of pre-existing material used by the evangelists.

Redaction criticism identifies the concerns and intentions of authors who have made use of pre-existing material. Again this is important in the interpretation of the texts of the four gospels.

"Biblical Theology" makes a study of the thought of particular biblical authors, their central preoccupations and the organic unity of their thought. In a sense, this is a study of the origins of Systematic Theology.

The historical awareness that has emerged in the modern period, has had an enormous impact on biblical studies. Because it has become part of the

contemporary outlook, a sound theological outlook must have an awareness of the facts being interpreted in the scriptural texts (through the various literary forms being made use of. *Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei verbum)* has given its support to the use of the critical methods we have summarised in the interpretation of the biblical texts. It should be noted however, that the historical-critical method, when used in isolation, is an inadequate guide in the interpretation of the faith content of the Scriptures. As the literature of the People of God, the Scriptures will only show forth their true meaning within the living tradition of the Church. As the Spirit of God was active in the formation of the Scriptures as record of revelation, the same Spirit sustains the Church in the maintaining of the true faith age after age. This is well explained in a document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993).

Positive Theology also studies the on-going expression of the living faith of the Church. Patrology studies the thought of the great theologians who were pastors in the early Christian centuries. Today, studies in this field are greatly enriching Catholic theology. (An excellent introduction to Patrology is Henri de Lubac's seminal work *Catholicism*, which shows how the writings of the Fathers shed light on contemporary theological problems.)

Positive Theology also studies the changing forms in which the one faith of the Church has been expressed in different ages. This discipline is called History of Dogmas or The Development of Doctrines. Today's students will find John Henry Newman's influential work, *An Essay in the Development of Doctrines* (first

published in 1878, and since published in various editions) very enlightening – in it Newman explains how, a convert to Catholicism, he came to recognise that the Catholic Church of his time was one with the Church of the beginnings.

(A good example of the way the presentation of the truths of faith can change in different periods is the central truth of Christian faith – the world's salvation through Christ's death on the Cross. You can follow these remarkable developments in the Emmaus Series DVD, "Why the Cross?" Most of the DVDs in this series follow the historical development of Catholic thought and practice.)

4. Systematic Theology: Some developments in our Western tradition

Students of theology should be aware that there are two great traditions of Christian theology, that of the Eastern Church and that of the Western Church. In the early Christian centuries, the cultural centre of Christianity was in the East, where theology gave its attention the great mysteries of faith, the Incarnation and the Trinity. In the West, theology of early centuries was concerned with pragmatic issues such as Church unity and discipline. The first great issue debated in the West (in the 4th to 5th centuries) concerned the Grace of God in the life of Christians. This practical approach found a remarkable expression in the Monastic Movement, which contributed so much to the development of a Christian civilization in the West.

(Students interested in the methodological principles used in Systematic Theology are referred to John

Thornhill, *Christian Mystery in the Secular Age*, pp 138-42 and chs 11 and 12.)

The Western Church was for centuries almost overwhelmed by the barbarian tribes who invaded Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire. St Augustine (d.430) towers over this period. He died as Vandal barbarians were besieging the city of Hippo in North Africa of which he was bishop. Augustine's thought was a dominant influence in the Western Church for several centuries after his death, keeping alive the inspiring message of Christian faith. A brilliant rhetorician, his thought owed much to the tradition of thought established by the Greek philosopher, Plato (d.348 BC) – the dominant philosophy of the age.

By the 10th century, a flourishing Islamic civilization dominated the Mediterranean region, including a large part of present-day Spain. The 11th century, however, saw a cultural renaissance taking place in Europe, as Western Christendom emerged from the Dark Ages and the culture of the High Middle Ages took shape – a civilization which saw the establishing of urban centres, the building of the medieval cathedrals and the foundation of the great universities of Europe.

By 1100, centres of Islamic culture, like Toledo and Lisbon, had been reconquered by the Christians. Friendly relations were maintained, however, among the various cultural traditions that had long lived side by side, Christian and Jewish scholars collaborated with Islamic scholars, who were familiar with the heritage of ancient Greece. It was especially the work of Aristotle (d. 322 BC) which attracted the attention of Western thinkers. As a consequence, Aristotle was to have an

influence in the development of Western thought that can hardly be exaggerated – not only in the field of philosophy and theology, but also in initiating the scientific tradition of the West.

(The Jewish scholar, R.E. Rubinstein, in his work, *Aristotle's Children: How Christians, Muslims and Jews Rediscovered Ancient Wisdom* (2003), has made a study of these developments. He describes, for instance, the project of shared translation and scholarship organised by Archbishop Raymond of Toledo, in which Islamic, Jewish and Christian scholars collaborated in a centre he established in Toledo's cathedral complex.)

Plato and Aristotle were both thinkers of outstanding genius. Both made use of reason (*nous*) the great discovery of the Greek philosophers. But their approaches were different.

Plato's was a synthetic vision of reality as a whole, a hierarchical totality ascending from the material order to transcendent divine archetypes, and of human society as an organic whole. Augustine found this approach congenial as he made his synthesis of Christian faith. One of Plato's most famous works was *The Republic*; Augustine's most influential work was *The City of God*, which compared a world shaped by Christian ideals with the world of paganism.

Aristotle, on the other hand, was first and foremost an analytical thinker, employing experimental observation and rational analysis to uncover the ultimate reality of things. Aristotle came to the attention of the West at a time when a renewal of scholarship and theology was taking place in the recently established universities –

initiating a tradition that came to be called "scholasticism". St Anselm of Canterbury, whose definition of theology we have quoted, was one of the initiators of this movement. His acutely argued writings were very contemplative, in a manner reminiscent of Augustine. The approach of Abelard (d. 1142), an influential teacher of the period, was very different. His treatise, *Sic et non* (For and Against) discussed apparent contradictions in doctrinal statements of the accepted authorities of the Catholic tradition – more in the spirit of Aristotle's logic. In fact, Aristotle's treatises on Logic were among the philosophical works soon to be much quoted in the lively debates of the emerging "scholastic" tradition.

Under the leadership of St Albert the Great (d.1280) and his brilliant student, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) the Dominicans in the universities adopted Aristotle as their authority in the philosophy they made use of in their theology. The influence of Augustine was still strong, and the two traditions were often in confrontation in the disputations that had an important place in the life of the universities, St Bonaventure the Franciscan contemporary and friend of Aquinas followed the tradition of Augustine.

Today's scholarship shows that Aquinas, while owing a great debt to Aristotle, moved on to create a synthesis which reconciled the elements of truth to be found in the achievements of both great Greek thinkers.

(Most students meet the work of Aquinas in his *Summa* of theology. This work, they should understand, is not a textbook. Aquinas based his lectures on the Scriptures. His *Summa* is a reference work providing

basic principles, in the spirit of the theological disputations carried on in Aquinas' time.)

Ever since his own time, the authority of Aquinas has been highly regarded in Catholic thought. Late in the 19th century, Pope Leo XIII, a promoter of renewal in Catholic thought, encouraged the use of Aquinas in theological education. Meanwhile, a strong movement of "return to the sources" was bringing new life to Catholic theology. Vatican II encouraged this movement, and in recent decades interest in the thought of Aquinas has waned. Today, however, a renewal of interest is bringing a fresh appreciation of the genius of St Thomas and the contribution his thought can make in the discussion of contemporary questions.

*(Students wishing to learn more about these matters will find much accessible material in the work of Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that have shaped the western mind* (1991): see the Index under, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Abelard, Aquinas, Scholasticism etc.)*

The Reformation crisis of the 16th century had an unfortunate influence on Western theology. Controversy and polemic polarised Catholic and Protestant thought in a confrontation that stifled theological development. Catholic theology appealed to the authority of the Council of Trent, which upheld the substance of the Catholic tradition of faith – this theology tending to systematise Trent's teachings in a "neo-scholasticism" which defended Catholic teaching, but was superficial and uninspiring, with no concern to explore the riches of our faith tradition. This "neo-

scholasticism” contributed to a waning of interest in the thought of Aquinas.

As has been noted, in the 19th and 20th centuries, a “return to the sources”, assisted by advances in historical and biblical scholarship brought new life to Catholic theology; and the ecumenical movement has helped overcome the polarisation that hindered theological development.

Each theologian has scholars who have pointed the way forward for them. In my experience the following contemporary theologians stand out for me

Karl Rahner developed a comprehensive theological synthesis of the Christian Mystery unfolding in the ongoing story of humanity, Rahner took as his starting point the outlook and deep spiritual yearnings of the contemporary world.

Bernard Lonergan made a contribution to theological method. Analysing what is involved in a wholesome theological inquiry, he has shown that it mirrors the intellectual and spiritual processes called for in the living of an authentic human life.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, a thinker of outstanding erudition and cultural awareness, in several comprehensive studies of aspects of the Christian Mystery, has brought out the manner in which the dramatic and aesthetic awareness which have such a basic place in our human experience, can open the way to a fresh appreciation of the Christian faith’s understanding of the unfolding of God’s designs.

These three thinkers, it is interesting to note, would consider themselves as working in the tradition of Aquinas.

Ives Congar is another theologian who made a significant contribution to contemporary theology. A pioneer in Catholic ecumenism, his work, clarifying a balanced theology of the Church, helped prepare the way for the teaching of Vatican II's central document, *The Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*.

It should be noted that Catholic theology today makes use of contemporary philosophical movements, in particular Phenomenology and Personalism. The thought of John Paul II, for instance, brings together the principles of Aquinas and the insights of contemporary Personalism – reflection on the many dimensions of human experience (authenticity and fidelity, trust, commitment, hope etc.) which are constitutive of personhood.

5. Pastoral Theology: Handing on the faith

The thought of our times, and the art and literature which interpret contemporary experience, have brought an increased awareness of the human condition. It is not surprising, therefore, that there have been important developments in Pastoral Theology, the phase of theological inquiry which seeks effective ways to bring the message of Christian faith into dialogue with the outlook of our times.

Some theologians have helped clarify fundamental issues that can help Christians approach this task realistically. M.-D. Chenu, a French Dominican who helped prepare the text of *Vatican II's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* has drawn attention to the practical importance of the distinction between Faith and Religion, two dynamisms in our Christian experience which most people tend to see as indistinguishable.

A phenomenological consideration of these two dynamisms, Chenu points out, reveals a significant contrast. The movement of religion is from the creature to God, expressing itself in service, worship and cult. On the other hand, the dynamism of faith (as what we have seen discussing the nature of revelation and faith has made clear) is completely reversed – the creature is primarily the recipient of a gift of God. If these two dynamisms (both of them essential to a healthy Christian life) are not given a balanced practical expression, religious practices can stifle the growth of an authentic faith, debilitating the life and missionary thrust of the Christian community, (See John Thornhill, *Christian Mystery in the Secular Age*, pp 257-59 on Chenu's work.)

In today's pastoral theory, Missiology and Catechetics are recognised as theological disciplines of great importance in the life of the Church. Historical and sociological studies are made use of by Missiology. Developmental psychology is one of the disciplines made use of by Catechetics. (The work of James Fowler on *Stages of Faith Experience*, presented in one of the DVDs of The Emmaus Series, has an obvious relevance³ for Catechetics.)

The findings of Psychology, of course, have an important contribution to make to the Church's pastoral ministry. Henry Nouwen, a professional psychologist has made a notable contribution in the spirit of the Christian gospel. (See his *Wounded Healer*, and his other works). Jean Vanier, a prophet for our times, has given his life to caring for seriously handicapped people, gaining insights into the human condition which he has shared in his numerous writings. The principles he identifies have an inspiring relevance to every form of pastoral initiative in the life of the Church.

SESSION 4

The Creed and Church Teaching

Introductory clarifications

“We believe” – Popular language is misleading (“I believe someone called”). We are concerned with a level of conviction and commitment that determines the kind of persons we are.

Our lives are shaped by a great variety of views and attitudes: some idiosyncratic (e.g. “Young people are unreliable”); some reflect a bias, coming from group interests and securities – racial, political, sectarian etc. – (e.g. “The others are up to no good”); some are personal life stands that express our identity and personhood (e.g. “I give my word”; “My family will come first in my life choices”). Without these last, a life carried along by prevailing fads and fashions is hardly a human life at all.

“When we hear of a man too clever to believe, we are hearing of something having almost the character of a contradiction in terms...like hearing of a nail that was too good to hold down a carpet; or a bolt that was too strong to keep a door shut ... holding no form of creed but contemplating all, then he is by this very process sinking slowly backwards into the vagueness of vagrant animals and the unconsciousness of the grass. Trees have no dogmas. Turnips are singularly broad-minded.” (G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, London, 1905, p.286)

“We believe in God”

St Augustine (d.430) distinguished three similar but very different expressions in Latin usage: “Credo Deo” (“I believe what God has said”); “Credo Deum” (“I believe there is a God”); and “Credo in Deum” (“I believe because through God’s grace I find in God the object of my heart’s desire, the goal towards I want my life to be directed”). In common English usage, “I believe in God” means “I believe that there is a God”; The first words of the Creed have the third of Augustine’s meanings – for him the Christian believes in order “to enter into love”, in order “to walk towards God”, in order to be “incorporated among the members” of Christ. We have a similar expression, as when we tell a human friend that “we believe in them”.

The Creeds (“Apostles’ Creed” and “Nicene Creed”) have a Trinitarian form – three articles, each of which concerns one of the three Persons of the Trinity. This reflects their origin, as associated with the ritual of baptism.

The Creeds have also a narrative form. The Christian faith stands or falls with the facts in human history through which God and God’s ways and designs have been revealed – the history of the people and their remarkable sense of destiny; and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfilment of Israel’s hopes.

This is in contrast with other religious traditions of the world: cosmic religions’ mythologies interpret the divine as known through the cosmos; the so-called higher religions interpret the divine as recognised within the

human psyche – as human interiority experiences an openness towards absolutes reflecting transcendent reality (Taoism and Confucianism, Hinduism and Buddhism, Hellenistic religions etc.)

Judaism and Islam (which probably had its original inspiration in the beliefs of a Jewish group which broke away from orthodox Christianity, seeing Jesus as the greatest of the prophets but unable to accept his divine identity) are sometimes associated with Christianity as religions “of the Book”. All three accept prophetic truth that of its nature is linked with historical facts.

The abbreviated narratives of the Creeds presuppose the extended narratives of the Scriptures – always an integral part of Christian worship.

The First Article

“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth”

The notion of God, as Creator – “from nothing” - of all that is outside God, is a basic tenet of Judeo-Christian faith that has immense implications. The divine powers of the world’s mythologies were seen as part of NATURE. The Creator God of Christian faith is absolutely transcendent, “wholly other”. There are no bearings, no interpretative frame that we may use to evaluate the workings of the divine omnipotence. We are totally dependent upon a decision and activity utterly beyond our comprehension. It is not surprising that humanity’s basic attitude towards God has frequently been one of dread and uncertainty.

The revelation that the Creator “saw all that he had made and it was very good” (Gen 1:31 – contradicting the assumption common to many mythologies that the problems of human existence are in some way linked with the work of the powers shaping the world) only accentuates humanity’s uncertainties before God. It is the abuse of human freedom and responsibility that is the source of the darkness and destructiveness that deform God’s creation (cf. Gen, chs 1-11).

But the first article of the Creed does not leave believers in this uncertainty – they are called to believe in God as “Father”, whose “almighty” power is directed to our everlasting good. This is the Good News that is the ultimate message of Judeo-Christian faith.

Thus we are introduced to something fundamental in our appreciation of the Creed: the three articles only have their full meaning when taken together. As we shall now see, the second article concerns the Son whose whole mission among us was to bring the Good News of the Father’s generous and merciful ways (cf. “Abba, Father” Mk 14:36; Mt 6:9; Rom 8:15; Lk 15 – the parable of the Prodigal Father).

“We believe in God”, with Augustine, therefore, “to enter into love”, “to walk towards God”.

The Second Article

"I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord
... conceived ... born ... crucified, died, ... buried.
On the third day ... rose again
... at the right hand of the Father
... to judge the living and the dead"

As we have noted, Christian faith is not the product of mythological interpretation of our human condition. Nor is it the expression of an ideology. It is a memory of events that are part of our human history. Mention of "Pontius Pilate", a minor governor of the Roman Empire, in the Nicene Creed, it has often been noted, anchors the confession of the Creed in the world's history. The ultimate significance of these events, of course, can only be recognised by faith, a gift of the Holy Spirit (3rd article).

Clearly this article recalls the events recorded in the New Testament. Of these events the resurrection is central, and decisive. It was in the light of this event that a group of followers who were demoralised and confused after the execution of Jesus found a new conviction - and they recognised that they must treasure all that Jesus said and did for future generations of believers (cf. 1 Cor 15:3-8; Luke 1:1-3).

"This (faith in the resurrection) is not a belief that grew up in the Church,, or a doctrine whose development might be traced. It is the central belief about which the Church itself grew, without which there would have been no Church and no gospels, at least of the kind we have ...

"... an act of remembrance – the remembrance of a real and well-known person – is a built-in feature of the faith that inspired the writing of the gospels ... But it was a memory now illuminated by a discovery that left them at first gasping with astonishment: that the leader they had thought irretrievably lost had got the better of death itself, in a way as inexplicable as it was indubitable." (C.H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity*, pp.28-29)

Clearly, such expressions as "seated", "ascended" and "risen" are metaphors that attempt to express an order of things utterly beyond our human experience.

Nourishing our faith with the memory of Saviour, "We believe in God" – "to enter into love", "to walk with god", to be "incorporated" into the new life which Christ has shared with us.

Explanatory Note:

The Mystery of the Trinity

God was revealed to old Israel through what God did for them as a people. As the Old Testament described God's self-expression, two themes established themselves: the Word of God (as creative, shaping history, confronting injustice) and the Spirit of God (as God's energising presence, giving the breath of life, raising up heroes, and looked forward to as bringing fulfilment to all Israel's messianic hopes).

The coming of the eternal Son among us brought a dramatic new depth to faith's understanding of these themes. Jesus, who was evidently "someone" other

that the Father to whom he prayed, was acknowledged to be "Lord" (i.e. entitled to the name given to Yahweh, the God of Israel's faith). Moreover, he promised to send the Spirit as "someone" other than himself and the Father. As the first Christians came to appreciate the relationship Jesus with the eternal Father, they came to venerate him as "the Word" (Jn ch. 1), so perfectly expressing all that the Father is as God that Father and Son share one life and glory. And the Father and the Son give a full expression to the love and joy of their divine life in the Spirit, who shares fully in their life and glory.

A Trinitarian awareness soon found expression in the different strands of writings of the New Testament. (For instance, in Paul: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God [the Father] and the fellowship of the Holy spirit be with you all", 2 Cor 13:14; in the synoptic gospel of Matthew: "baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", 28:19; and in John's gospel: "...when the Spirit of truth comes ... He will glorify me since all he tells you will be taken from what is mine. Everything the Father has is mine, that is why I said: All that he tells you will be taken from what is mine" 16:13-15).

Recall the remarkably succinct affirmation of the Gloria of the Mass liturgy: "you alone [of all persons of our experience] are the Lord, you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father".

The 4th century Father, St Hilary, expresses the terms of the mystery with masterly simplicity: "... there is one

power from which all things are; there is one offspring, through whom all things are; there is one gift of fulfilled hope. Nothing will be found lacking in this perfection, within which, in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, there is the infinity of the eternal, the vision of the image, the enjoyment of the gift" (On the Trinity, bk 2).

It took a couple of centuries for the non-biblical terms that properly express the Church's faith in the Trinity to be agreed upon. This terminology was clarified as two extreme interpretations were recognised as unorthodox. The first, that saw Father, Son and Spirit as three Gods, was clearly excluded by the profession of faith inherited from Israel, in One God (cf. "we are well aware ... that there is no God other than the One", 1 Cor 8:4). The other interpretation, offered in early Christian thought, was that the one God assumed different roles, as Father, Son and Spirit. It was soon rejected, as not doing justice to the distinction and inter-relationship of the Three evident in the life of Jesus. The terminology that finally found universal acceptance was "Three PERSONS in one NATURE". ("Person" corresponds to the question, "Who is that?"; "Nature" corresponds to the question, "What is that?" – In regard to the Trinity, the answer to the "who" question is threefold; in regard to the "what" question, the same answer is given in each case, "God" or "divine".)

Some contemporary theologians have questioned the use of the term "person" to express Christian faith in the Trinity. They point out that in our experience and common usage the term refers to an independent possessor of awareness and responsibility. Though Father, Son and Spirit are distinct – these theologians

point out - they share one divine life, knowledge and responsibility. To this objection it can be replied that while these "Persons" do not conform to our limited (created) model of personhood (something which should not surprise us) they in fact surpass the created model and are the realisation of its ultimate aspirations.

Human "persons" find fulfilment through communion with other persons, and the possession of truth and goodness that this sharing makes possible. This sharing is never complete, however, and it leaves unsatisfied the capacities and yearnings of the human heart. The perfect sharing of all things by the divine "Persons", far from being a disqualifying limitation, is the realisation of an ideal that is mysteriously intimated in the yearnings of the human heart. We are reminded, as we recognise this, that humans are made "in the image of God" (Gen 1:26).

The Third Article

**"I believe in the Holy Spirit
the holy catholic Church
the communion of saints
the forgiveness of sins
the resurrection of the body
and life everlasting"**

"I believe in the Holy Spirit"

In the life of Israel, God's Word and God's Spirit worked together - the former concerned with "things of the head"; the latter with "things of the heart". The Word came from outside, as it were, making, informing, confronting, challenging. The Spirit touched interior

depths, enlightening the heart, transforming and encouraging.

In what God has done for the world in Christ, this foreshadowing gives way to a final reality. The Holy Spirit is Christ's final gift, giving his followers insight into and love for the ways of God revealed and expressed in the life of Jesus and his Paschal Mystery, and giving them the courage to take up the mission he had given them (Pentecost).

The People of God, the Church, is called to be a "sacrament" or sign to the world of the life-giving ways of God and of the designs of God's heart. It is the Spirit of God who makes this mission possible. It is a sharing in the mission of the One who read from the Scriptures in the synagogue: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted" (Lk 4:14). Jesus told his followers: "You will be brought before governors and kings for my sake ... do not worry about how to speak ... because it is not you who will be speaking; the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you" (Mt 10: 18-20).

Paul takes up the theme: "the Spirit explores the depth of everything, even the depths of God. After all is there anyone who knows the qualities of anyone except his own Spirit?" (1 Cor 2: 10-11); "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5: 22).

The other clauses of the 3rd article spell out the effects of the life-giving presence of the Spirit of Christ:

“the catholic Church”

“Catholic”, or universal, in every sense: for all peoples and cultures; and comprehensive as a faithful expression of the benefits brought by the Saviour.

“the communion of saints”

Life in Christ through the Spirit establishes a fellowship which extends beyond the limits of space and time.

“the forgiveness of sins”

If humanity’s abuse of freedom and foolish turning away from the light have deformed the human story, Christ is the Saviour who, through the gift of his Spirit, brings healing, reconciliation and the mysterious inauguration of the final Kingdom or Reign of God – the final order of creation, totally shaped by God’s way, ways that free and fulfil.

“the resurrection of the body”

In the face of a profound distrust of the material world on the part of the prevailing Hellenistic culture, Christian faith and hope has looked forward from the beginning to a fully and authentically human life in a renewed creation.

“and life everlasting”

“The ultimate destiny of every human person” Vatican II teaches, “is one and divine” (*Const. on Church in Modern World*, n 22). Though it is utterly beyond our imagination and comprehension, we are called to share in the joy of the shared life of the Trinity.

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