



LIGHT & LIFE

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Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P., Director Jan-Feb 2024, Vol 77, No 1 Western Dominican Province

A Bishop's Worst Nightmare

There's a somewhat tongue-in-cheek saying that a bishop's worst nightmare is to have an apparition occur in his diocese. *Of course*, there are much worse things that could happen, but apparitions are bound to cause a multitude of problems and headaches for him, at least initially, especially in this age of rapid communication and mass media, where news travels quickly and far before the bishop even learns about it.

Once the news begins to spread, there will surely be new sources of division within the local, and quite possibly broader Church, over the authenticity of such visions. People will question the motives and character of those on the other side, conspiracy theories arise, and little good will seem to come out of something that *should* be a source of great blessing and charity within the People of God. Alas, the poor bishop won't be able to win with his people, no matter which side he's on, as he undertakes the long and arduous task of examining the veracity of the event.



At the Sacred Spring
Domenico Tojetti, 1877

Not many people may know this, but after Lourdes, a surge of false apparitions appeared in France – more than two dozen, in fact. Some were quickly dismissed as the work of charlatans or products of overactive imaginations

or people seeking attention, and a few even seemed to have some more disturbing origins, whether evil or psychological, it's hard to say from such a historical distance. The Evil One would have liked nothing better than to deceive the faithful, to divide the Church, or to distract from the authentic Marian apparition. This is not to say that a false visionary is a fraud or evil – their intentions may be pure and true – and some might simply be deceived or being manipulated. There are very, very few apparitions that Holy Mother Church has judged worthy of belief, and for good reason.

At this point, certain readers might call me an apparition sceptic. Oh, I *do* believe in them. I belong to an Order and a Confraternity whose history are based in part on visions or apparitions. If people tell me they had an apparition (saw or heard something) I presume the good, and believe that *they* at least believe, in good faith, in what they saw or heard. Many good vocations have come from such encounters. Most of all, I firmly believe that Our Lord appears to us at each and every Mass. He *truly* appears to us, not as a figment of imagination, and not as a mere mental memory, but under the appearance of mere bread and wine as the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Our Lord.

It's been said that "ordinary Catholic life – that's *boring*." The Uncontainable God of the Universe Himself is there on the altar, ready to come down to you, and some people *still* complain that *that's boring*? God is acting through the priest, absolving you from your sins that might doom you for eternity, which only God can do, and some folks are disappointed? Authentic visionaries have tended to live pretty humdrum lives after the apparitions, at least in the world's eyes. They have less to do with worldly delights, and are happy with the ordinary daily task of sanctity that our Faith asks of us: regular confession, Mass, spiritual reading, good works, and the like. They move further away from the superficial and ephemeral to the substantial and ever-lasting. Visions and apparitions don't last – LOVE does. St. Paul's famous call to love as the greatest and enduring gift in 1st Corinthians 13 reminds us that it's not in the flashy and extravagant where God can generally be found, but in the more ho-hum task of loving. There's

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

Revelation: Source(s) of Our Faith

By Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P.

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation (cf. Matt. 11:27; John 1:14 and 17; 14:6; 17:1-3; 2 Cor 3:16 and 4, 6; Eph. 1, 3-14.). (Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council, 2)

This beginning paragraph of the Second Vatican Council's proclamation on Divine Revelation was, in effect, a continuation of the debate and discussion that had arisen with full, urgent fury during the Protestant Reformation at the Council of Trent, through the First Vatican Council, and now had acquired a more hopeful sense during the nascent ecumenical dialogues with our separated brethren. One of the main points separating the Protestant from the Catholic and Orthodox positions came down to the Protestant doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* (meaning "Scripture alone"), that is, that the Holy Scriptures, or the Bible, were sufficient in themselves as a source of the revelation of God, or at least in everything that needed to be known about Him.

In spite of the seeming simplicity of the position of *Sola Scriptura*, it tends to fall apart from both the theoretical and practical sides. In practice, Scripture is not always so self-evident as to assure agreement of any kind. The incredible multiplicity of Protestant ecclesial bodies and independent little churches (usually labeled "non-denominational") implies an impossible number of interpretations over the very same text. At this point in history, some Protestant bodies with long histories are dividing over the question of same-sex marriage, with both sides attempting to use Holy Scriptures, often using their specific manner of interpreting Scripture to support their aims.

In theory, this is attractively simple and deceiving. After all does not St. Paul tell us that, "*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works*" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). However, even the early Church, in the very time of the Apostles, could not always agree with what Scripture meant in the context of the Risen Lord. St. Paul spends an awful lot of his time trying to focus his readers back to what he considers the key Gospel concept they need

to take in – yet he is most likely writing his epistles before any Gospels were actually handed down. Even a concept as simple as *love*, of all things, needs to be explained. Many couples are enamored of the Scripture passage where St. Paul lists what love is, "*Love is patient, love is kind...*" in 1 Corinthians 13, but this is not a Hallmark card moment for St. Paul. This is him telling the Corinthians, in no uncertain terms, "What love is, you aren't. Let me explain this for you."

Even right before the passage I cited above from 2 Timothy, St. Paul admonishes, "*But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures [that is, the Old Testament], which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus*" (2 Timothy 3:14-15). Here he is saying that he handed down teaching to his readers, not written down, as far as we can tell. Of course, he is not discarding the Old Testament – he is using the Old Testament to *explain* Jesus Christ the Messiah to his audience. But he needs to explain other things as well. Elsewhere, he adds, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and **hold the traditions** which ye have been taught, **whether by word, or our epistle**" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). And elsewhere, "Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, **and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you**" (1 Corinthians 11:2).

The point is not, as some accuse the Catholic Church of doing, that Tradition would somehow trump and "override" Scripture, but rather, that Tradition would complement and help fulfil the living out of the Gospel among believers.

One final point in this regard is the example of abortion. As Christians, we were unanimous in condemning it for centuries and even millennia. In more fairly recent times, many who are "pro-choice" (by their own definition) and self-proclaimed people of faith can try to argue from various Scriptural events or teachings, yet these seem more an argument from a lawyer as how to properly interpret the Law. That Law *has* been interpreted, from the very beginning, as we read in the Didache (known as "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," written probably before the Gospel of John), stating plainly, "you shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is born" (Didache, Ch. 2). In other words, not everything could be stated plainly in the Gospels. That is not the point of the Gospels. St. John ends his Gospel saying that not everything wondrous that Jesus did could be written here, just enough to at least come to know Christ (John 20:30-31). If Scriptures were sufficient in themselves... why are there so many books in the "Religion" section of bookstores trying to explain what these passages mean and how to apply them? Scripture is not merely a "how-to" book. It is various forms of literature, often from oral traditions, inspired by the Holy Spirit, written down by inspired human authors. These did not come down from Heaven in written form as tablets, ready-made. They became Scripture from within the teaching bodies of the Jews in the Old Testament, and the Apostles and Evangelists in the New Testament.

TRENT SPEAKS UP

“[I]n order to restrain petulant spirits, [the Council] decrees, that no one, relying on his own skill, shall,--in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, --wresting the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church,--whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures,--hath held and doth hold; or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers; even though such interpretations were never (intended) to be at any time published” (Concerning the Edition and Use of the Sacred Books, Second Decree, Council of Trent).

Even during the time of the Protestant Reformation, vastly differing interpretations, both individual and in the various Protestant Confessions, were wreaking havoc upon both the Body of Christ, His Church, and upon the body politic of the world. This is not to say that there is one Tradition also written down forever in tablets from Heaven. The Church wrestles with issues as they come up, and from the Scriptures *and* the sense of the Scriptures that we can say the whole Church has agreed on, since the beginning, She, the Church, can make definitive statements. Now, not any one Church Father is perfect, since each Church Father also wrote before certain things were handed down definitely. They are allowed *their* errors, the same as *we* might be allowed our own if we do not have some defined text or doctrine. Once defined, we assent to those authoritatively defined positions. But, from the sense of them all, we gather the sense as it applies to us in our times. Human nature is such that even with a fairly self-evident text, people will find ways to disagree on it and argue endlessly about it – I only have to show you the comments sections on the internet to prove my point. We *need* the Church to speak on such matters as the authoritative body on Earth. In this matter, I find it better that She move slowly and deliberately, rather than rushing in toward the Spirit of the Age.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

*“The sacred and holy, ecumenical, and general Synod of Trent,—lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the same three legates of the Apostolic See presiding therein,—keeping this always in view, that, errors being removed, the purity itself of the Gospel be preserved in the Church; which (Gospel), before promised through the prophets in the holy Scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, **first promulgated with His own mouth, and then commanded to be preached by His Apostles to every creature, as the fountain of all, both saving truth, and moral discipline; and seeing clearly that this truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand; (the Synod) following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety, and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament—seeing that one God is the author of both—as also the said traditions, as well those appertaining to faith as to morals, as having been dictated, either by Christ’s own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession”** (Concerning Canonical Scripture, Council of Trent).*

Now even though this, again, might seem clear to some, it still left undefined the exact way Scripture and Tradition work together. There were arguments and disagreements even at Trent on this. *“Interestingly, the original draft of the decree, presented on March 22, 1546, was more explicit on this matter by stating, ‘This truth [of the Gospel] is contained partly [partim] in written books, partly [partim] in unwritten traditions.’” For reasons unknown, however, the Council Fathers changed the partim-partim formulation to a simple *et in* in the final decree. Much ink has been spilled trying to explain this change. In fact, in many regards, the change has become the principal issue of the debate over the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, since understanding the intention behind the change sheds significant light on how to correctly interpret the definitive decree. As will be shown below, different understandings of the change have led to rather drastically different interpretations of the Tridentine decree, resulting in Catholic theologians coming to theologically incompatible conclusions regarding the relationship between Scripture and Tradition.”* (*The Relationship Between Scripture and Tradition According to the Council of Trent*, Matthew L. Selby, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, Master’s Thesis, 2013).

We can then see that even the nature of Scripture and Tradition is not always entirely self-evident as to meaning, and may well allow and tolerate some ambiguity, as no Council will define at one point everything. Some arguments the various Councils see as something to be “saved for later discussion,” and not as the central point the specific Council would be trying to make.

Let us use the analogy here of our lungs – somehow, both lungs, breathing of the same air, come to nourish our blood with life-giving oxygen. How these two lungs might work together is better understood in the human body than in the Body of Christ, since our two lungs, Scripture and Tradition, while breathing of the same Spirit, do not seem to always “sound” the same, at least in their manner of speaking. However they might work together, they do not work against each other, but rather both, for the same Body of Christ. Jumping ahead again to the Second Vatican Council:

*Hence **there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.*** (*Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council*, 9)

THE FIRST VATICAN COUNCIL AND OUR WORLD

*Now this supernatural revelation, according to the belief of the universal church, as declared by the sacred council of Trent, is contained in written books **and unwritten traditions,***

which were received by the apostles from the lips of Christ himself, or came to the apostles by the dictation of the holy Spirit, and were passed on as it were from hand to hand until they reached us. (On Revelation, First Vatican Council, Chapter 2:5).

The First Vatican Council thus highlights that these Traditions are continually handed down through the heirs to the apostles, that is, the bishops, with the implication that Tradition will continue to be handed down until the end of time. Near the beginning of the Roman Canon (also known as: Eucharistic Prayer I), the celebrant begs God:

"Be pleased to grant her [the Church] peace, to guard, unite and govern her throughout the whole world, together with your servant N. our Pope and N. our Bishop, **and all those who, holding to the truth, hand on the catholic and apostolic faith.**"

This, of course, does not deny nor pretend that there will not be erroneous bishops. Perhaps this is why Christ allowed Judas to be included in His blessed first company, as an example not to be followed, but that will exist. During the Arian controversy of the Fourth Century, this outright heresy flourished in some parts so much, that St. Jerome was able to write that, ""The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian." Neither he, nor the good Church Fathers, nor the holy People of God, however, gave up the fight for the holy Faith. I think of our own world today, especially in Germany and their so-called Synodal Way, that the Holy Father himself has spoken against their erroneous aspects. My point, again, being that I do not despair, but fight on for the Faith, as countless bishops, priests, religious, and faithful People of God have done throughout the history of the Church, and will continue to do so until Christ comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead. People will often come to me complaining in the confessional, perhaps even despairing of the state of the Church in our own days. Here, we need historical *and* theological perspective. Somehow, we as a body of believers seemed to have absorbed the fallacy of constant progress, where we either evolve or advance continually, and can never go "backwards" as a species or world or even as a Church. We most certainly can – this is why the Church *always* needs *true* reform. Even we as individual members need to do the same. This view of history is not Scriptural – Christ did not say we will only get better with age as a Church, but that there will be struggles, we will contend with heresies and divisions, and that, in fact, it will be even worse toward the very end. Christ does not ask us to be "on the right side of history," whatever that means, but to be faithful and true to **Him**. For He is the one who will judge all human history, not us.

THE PLACE OF MARY, OR ANY SAINT, IN ALL THIS

Speaking of private revelations, that is, revelations made to individuals, and not once and for all in the Deposit of Faith, Pope Benedict XIVth, back in the mid 18th century, so before most of what we call "Modernism," wrote, "*It is not obligatory nor even possible to give them [revelations to individuals, even saints] the assent of Catholic faith, but only of human faith, in conformity with the dictates of prudence, which presents them to us as probable and worthy of pious belief*" (De canon., III, liii, xxii, II).

To put this in the most basic terms, these private revelations you can either accept or reject, and you would not be going against the Catholic Faith. Nothing in these

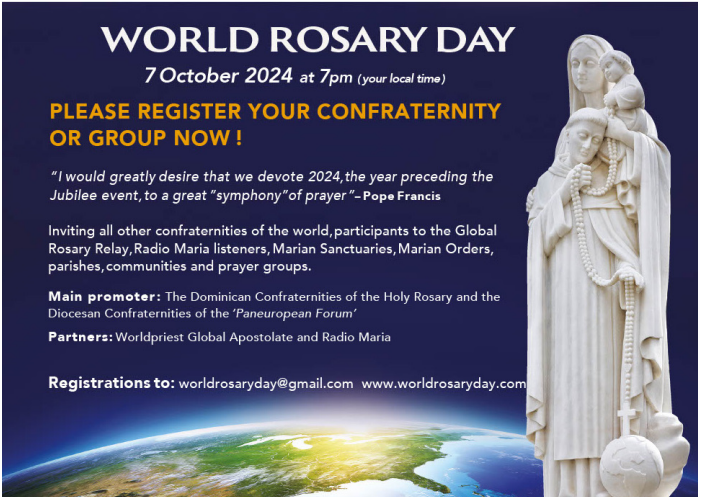
private revelations can take away nor add to the Deposit of Faith once and for all given, only help us in our living our daily lives as Christians, and perhaps, even in the case of Lourdes, help us affirm as part of the testament of the saints and faithful, that a Doctrine is true (that is, in this case, the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary). The dogma of the Immaculate Conception did not come into being with Lourdes.

Thus, one is free to reject or ignore the message of Fatima, for example, and still remain a Catholic in perfectly good standing. I certainly *don't* recommend it, anymore than I would recommend ignoring any legitimate warning from any person. The laws of physics do not change whether or not you walk in front of a runaway truck, only the result, so it certainly behooves us to at least pay attention to those exhortations that Holy Mother Church has judged worthy of belief to avoid disaster. "Worthy of belief" therefore does not mean, "MUST be believed," but rather, that these are good things to heed and listen to.

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nothing wrong with flashy or extravagant things, but those should be leading you *to* God, not away *from* God, which is what happens if we focus on them instead. It's not in the dating, nor in the honeymoon, that a man proves his love for his wife. It's more in going to the market at 3 AM dressed in pajama bottoms, because his wife is sick, or has terrible pregnancy cravings. It's mom attending a choir recital, for the tenth time, of everyone's kids butchering the same corny songs, because she loves her children and is proud of them. Everyone who loves knows what I'm talking about. He or she will have a love that will endure when the bad times come – and they *will* come, but they will face it with their beloved spouse.

In a like manner, live a good life, taking care of your spiritual side, and you know what? When the end *does* come, whether you peacefully pass away in your sleep, or you experience the most Apocalyptic scenario, you can calmly face it with God, with the Blessed Mother of His Son at your side. And THAT is good news.



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