

Item #31 (Searching for the Obvious: Toward a Catholic Hermeneutic of Scripture with Seminarians Especially in Mind)

This was Entry #35 on my previous website.

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1) Some Preliminary Considerations¹

In the past two hundred years or more a massive quantity of information about Scripture and the world which saw the writing of Scripture has been produced. All of this information is precious and, obviously, none of it should be discarded but should be considered useful, potentially if not actually, for helping make Scripture a vital force in the lives of believers. But just how and to what extent this information should be used at the present time in approaching the Scriptures when seminarians are in mind—that is the question. More exactly, How should the study of Scripture be framed and hence how should Scripture be presented to those interested in making the Scripture and its message an integral part of their lives? Specifically, an attempt will be made here explicitly to frame the study and presentation of Scripture as it was implicitly framed and presented to the first generation of Christian believers. Hence the first part of the title, “Searching for the Obvious”. But this orientation based on the first generation of Christian believers will be guided by the goal of framing and presenting the material to contemporary seminarians who presumably wish to make Scripture a part of their lives and to help others do the same. Hence the second part of the title, “Toward a Catholic Hermeneutic of Scripture with Seminarians Especially in Mind”.

The first-generation Christians approached the Scriptures with faith, believing instinctively that Scripture was written by people of faith about people of faith and for people of faith. They approached it with their Christian worship already firmly in place—the Christian Eucharist which came into existence

¹ What follows in the text is a deliberate simplification of a complex problem which of course merits extended treatment in its own right. It is hoped that the simplification has not led to distortion.

through the words of Jesus at the Last Supper and which was brought to fulfillment with His Death and Resurrection. This was the nucleus of Tradition which existed before any New Testament writing existed and which provided the basis for the eventual writing of the Gospels. The belief of these Christians, as they were well aware, came about as a gift of God through the Resurrection and was centered on the Eucharist; it was a faith which the Gospels would be designed to deepen and illumine. There was no “Hermeneutics of Suspicion” to cloud their reception of what their leaders wrote for their guidance. For their Scripture they relied at first on what is now known as the Old Testament. But the guidance they needed in interpreting this written word was given ultimately by Jesus and what He said and did—and what happened to Him at the Resurrection. It was ultimately the Father acting through Jesus and the Spirit whom Jesus bestowed on the Church which He founded that gave the first Christians the orientation they needed for living their lives based on a faith they had taken as legitimated by God at the Resurrection.

Given this approach, then, two basic needs are evident:

1) the need to enable the contemporary Catholic to be placed in contact with the original meaning of the text of Scripture as closely as possible to the way which the first-generation Christians used in approaching it;

2) the need to enable the contemporary Catholic to grasp the relevance of this original meaning for his/her own life as the first generation Christians did.

Put succinctly, the contemporary Catholic must be helped to go backward in time to the world of the first Christians in order to grasp the meaning of the Scriptures as they did, and then must be helped to return to the present from the world of the first Christians to see and apply the relevance of that original meaning for his or her life in the contemporary world.²

² When approaching a text—any text—we are entitled to interpret it any way that we think appropriate. Naturally this results in some interpretations which are as a matter of fact more appropriate than others. In the 21st century, where science is so uncritically accepted as the ultimate arbiter of knowing things as they really are, it is not surprising that even some believers choose science as the prime analogate for their study of the Bible. Inasmuch as science is popularly accepted as the embodiment of reason at its most successful in understanding the real world (the hard sciences of physics and chemistry and biology and their handmaid, technology), an approach to Scripture based on this approach would seem at first sight the best chance for understanding Scripture as it really should be understood. And since part of this success is attributed to science’s prescinding from God, it would seem that the

Underlying this process are several factors which make the endeavor feasible:

- 1) the same shared faith of the Church among the first Christians and among the Catholics of today;
- 2) the same shared Eucharist among the first Christians and among the Catholics of today;
- 3) the same shared gift of the Spirit for both understanding the original meaning and then applying it to everyday living among the first Christians and among the Catholics of today;
- 4) the same shared virtues (in addition to faith) on the part of the first Christians and on the part of the Catholics of today.

The above approach, it should be noted, is not the approach of many scholars who choose to examine the text of Scripture from points of view in accord with their own goals of amassing information or of influencing/enriching others in various ways. Further, it is not the approach of other Christian communities who do not share in the Eucharist and in membership in the Catholic Church the way Catholics do. Their approaches are not necessarily wrong as far as they go, but they are different and, from the Catholic standpoint, limited. The results of such approaches can be helpful at times to the Catholic approach, but only if in conjunction with them the integrity of the Catholic approach is maintained.

2) The Basic Principles of a Catholic Hermeneutic of Scripture

A) The Basic Principles of a Catholic Hermeneutic of Scripture Involving the Original Meaning

In the context of the approach to Scripture outlined above, it is useful to review the instructions for interpreting the original meaning of Scripture given by the Second Vatican Council as schematized in *The*

study of Scripture should prescind from God, i.e., faith. But this approach is really an acceptance of scientism, not science, i.e., an approach to reality which arrogates to itself all knowledge, claiming that beyond the scientific method lies only the unknowable. Further, this approach of prescinding from faith ignores the whole question of Scripture as literature: the prime analogate for understanding Scripture should be the art of reading, for literature is basically what Scripture is, not the object of the hard sciences which are divorced from persons. Just as great literature inevitably involves the reader in a unique mix of objective meaning and subjective relevance in the context of persons, so Scripture inevitably involves the reader in a unique mix of objective meaning and subjective relevance in the context of persons, even on the level of unaided reason. But for those gifted with faith, this unique mix of objective meaning and subjective relevance is ever so much more profound because the persons involved are ever so much more meaningful. But it is a profundity and meaning known only through faith, and this, it would seem is unacceptable even to some believers for whom reason and reason alone is the bottom line of all knowledge.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. The unspoken understanding is that these instructions are intended for believing Catholics who want to make Scripture a meaningful part of their lives.

The first principle is that the meaning of Scripture cannot be divorced from the meaning intended by the human author, and that the discovery of this meaning requires awareness of all the purely human factors which went into the composition of the text (*CCC*, §§109-110).

The second principle is that Scripture must be interpreted in accordance with the Spirit who inspired it (*CCC*, §111). Thus, implicitly, a second, Divine, author enters the picture. Three criteria are proposed by the Council for interpreting Scripture according to the second principle, i.e., interpreting Scripture according to the Spirit who inspired it, i.e., according to the second, Divine author (*CCC*, §§111-114):

- 1) attention to the unity and content of the whole of Scripture;
- 2) attention to the living Tradition of the Church;
- 3) attention to the analogy of faith.

Each of these three directives needs clarification.

1) The Council explains that the unity and content of the whole of Scripture is based on Jesus Christ who is the center of God's purposes in inspiring the sacred text (*CCC*, §112). This implies that all of Scripture, even the Old Testament, is to be interpreted in the light of Jesus Christ. Given the supposition that faith should be involved in reading every part of Scripture, this consideration about the centrality of Jesus Christ indicates that reading the Old Testament with (Christian) faith needs elucidation. For the original human authors of the Old Testament were Israelites, Old Testament persons of faith, writing for Old Testament persons of faith, and about Old Testament persons of faith. But this Old Testament faith, genuine though it was (and is), did not (and does not) have the view of Jesus Christ that Christians have, i.e., that He rose from the dead and that He was Divine. The inference would thus seem to be that there are two ways in which faith can come into play in the reading of the Old Testament, one from the standpoint of the Old Testament human authors and one from the standpoint of the New Testament human authors. But God speaks through the human authors, and so the Christological meaning

of the Old Testament is ultimately based on the Old Testament meaning which was the work of authors who did not have the awareness of the Messiah that New Testament authors did. Understandably so, for the New Testament is in continuity with the Old Testament but also in discontinuity and in a definitive way. This definitive discontinuity is to be understood in the context of New Testament faith in the Resurrection and all that this implies about the Resurrection as the foundation for Christian belief (*CCC*, §112). But the belief that the human authors of the Old Testament wrote texts which objectively speak of Christ even though these human authors were unaware of this dimension implies the existence of the second, Divine author speaking through them. This understanding of the Old Testament is available only to those who believe in the Resurrection, that is, as Christians, and are thus open to the action of the Spirit, as the following directive explains.

2) The Council declares that the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who empowers the Church to give a spiritual interpretation of Scripture (*CCC*, §113). That is to say, the Spirit's guidance enables the Church to retain in her non-Scriptural identity what the written Word—Scripture—essentially represents. Hence her teaching can serve as a guide to what Scripture means, again with the Spirit as guarantor of truth.

3) The Council explains the analogy of faith as “the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation” (*CCC*, §114).

Perhaps an example would help bring home what would seem to be an illustration of what the Council intended. It is quite doubtful if the authors of the Old Testament ever thought that the Messiah they spoke about would be fully Divine in the sense held by Catholic belief. But in the light of the risen Christ one can see that certain Old Testament expressions can be understood in this sense, for example, “son of God”. An Old Testament author would have understood this expression as referring to an extraordinary person. And even in the New Testament, the phrase, for example, as originally uttered by Peter at the giving of the keys, would seem to have been understood in this sense, even if the words in some special sense applicable to Jesus are seen to come from an inspiration of God. But after the Resurrection the apostles and the other early Christians would have understood the phrase in the sense

that Christ is fully Divine. Assent to this truth is a gift of God, a gift given to the first Christians, for it was implied in the gift of assent to the Resurrection. Further, it was enshrined in the Tradition of the Church, as is indicated by the First Council of Nicaea, in 325. Finally, the truth of Christ's Divinity gives a coherence to the entire body of Scripture, Old Testament as well as new, as one would expect according to the analogy of faith.

Faith and reason are involved in all interpretation of the original meaning(s) of Scripture. But faith would seem to be the determining element, so that faith is the "form" of the intellectual virtues just as charity is the "form" of all the moral virtues. (See Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, II-II.23.8.) Thus faith "informs" reason without eliminating reason. Reason would prompt the interpreter to realize that an interpretation of Scripture which distorts the text instead of illumining it is not a way to arrive at the truth of what the Scripture says or what faith implies. This role of reason in interpreting should be neither overemphasized nor underemphasized if fideism and rationalism are to be avoided. It should not be in favor of an interpretation which takes a positive view of the Church and her teaching without an objective grounding in a text, nor should it be in favor of an interpretation which takes a negative view without such a grounding.

B) *The Basic Principles of a Catholic Hermeneutic of Scripture Involving the Contemporary Relevance of Scripture*

Under section 2A) the first step in the interpretation of Scripture was presented, that is, the interpretation of the meaning of the text according to the intention of the human and Divine authors.

The second step has to do with the determination of the *relevance* of that original meaning for the life of the person doing the interpreting. And just as the Holy Spirit has a crucial role in the determination of the meaning of the text according to the mind of the original authors, human and Divine, so the Holy Spirit has a crucial role in the determination of the relevance of that meaning for the life of the one doing the exegesis. That is to say, the Spirit acts as guide in applying the meaning of the inspired text to the believer's life (CCC, §1101). Here, too, perhaps, it would not be inappropriate to speak of two "authors" of the life of each person: 1) the person himself/herself and 2) the Spirit. For each believer, just like any

other person born into the world, is writing the story of his or her life, that is, he or she is responsible for what he or she does and needs the Spirit for those actions insofar as they are good. Insofar as the individual believer's actions are good, the Holy Spirit is a true "co-author".

In other words, the Catholic hermeneutic of Scripture is intrinsically vertical in its twin aspects, both as regards the objective meaning of the text and as regards the subjective application of the text: Catholic hermeneutic has an explicit relation to the Transcendent. The fact that the second step involves individual application of Scripture will not result in the chaos of the private interpretation of Scripture which characterized and continues to characterize Protestant Christianity, for the second step has to proceed through the first step if it is to be in agreement with what the Spirit has objectively inspired. The link between the original meaning of the text and the relevance of that original meaning for anyone not constituting the original audience is vital for assuring continuity between the two steps.

3) Reflections

It is clear that the Catholics of today cannot return to the first century and become the believers of the first Christian generation. But it is also clear, from a comparison between the suggestions made in the Section 1) above ("Some Preliminary Considerations") and the norms outlined in Section 2) above ("The Basic Principles of a Catholic Hermeneutic of Scripture") that the essentials of the approach of the Christians of the first generation can be translated into the contemporary world in a meaningful way because of the common elements involved in the lives of both generations.

Basic to the approaches in both eras is primacy of the implied authority of the Church with regard to Scripture. This approach does not mean that the Church is "over" Scripture; but it does mean that the Church's teaching authority judges the interpretation of Scripture: the Holy Spirit living in the Magisterium of the Church has the ultimate say as regards the meaning of the same Holy Spirit who inspired Scripture. But Catholics, in interpreting the original meaning of Scripture, should be reflexively aware of the need to look at a given text in the context of all of Scripture and in the context of the analogy of faith, and, above all, in the context of the authorship of the Holy Spirit. And this, not only for access to the original meaning of the text as intended by both the human and Divine authors, but also for

the ascertaining the relevance of that meaning in their own lives.

Nowhere does the Church seek to “prove” her authority, though she does explain it as she asserts it. Everything is based on faith as a “given”, which is an attribute of the Mystical Body of Christ which constitutes the essence of the Church and is based ultimately both on the faith of the human Christ as He faced the sacrificial death which brought the liturgical celebration of that sacrificial death to its completion, and on the Divine Christ’s gift to the Church of His Spirit. Individual participants of that Mystical Body which is the Church are capable of rejecting that faith but not capable of acquiring it: faith is a gift from God, freely given and freely to be kept.

4) Seminarians Especially in Mind:

A) The Goal of a Seminary Teacher of Scripture in the Catholic Tradition

A seminary teacher in the Catholic tradition should review the above material at the beginning of each course and, in addition, make clear his/her own position. That is to say, he should make clear that he is teaching in the Catholic tradition or, if he is not, what tradition he is teaching in. For example, the Lutheran tradition, the Calvinist tradition, the secularist tradition, etc. He should specify how this affects his teaching in a Catholic seminary. Further, it is the prerogative of the teacher to make known his understanding of the relevance of the objective meaning for his own life, though he should not be required to do so. But nothing prevents him from giving examples of how given individuals view such relevance, provided that the rights of privacy be honored. The professor of Scripture should be aware of how Scripture can fit in as the soul of theology, and should be ready to expiate on the relationship at will.

In general it should be emphasized that Scripture is the soul of theology because Scripture is centered on Christ, and theology in the Catholic tradition should be centered on Christ. This, of course is a challenge to professors of theology as well as to professors of Scripture.

In this connection it would be useful to point out how much Western civilization owes to the Catholic Church with regard to the unique value of the human person. This heritage is, of course, being challenged today by many -isms such as secularism, paganism, hedonism, evolutionism, and so on. The basic dignity of the human person consists in his or her capacity to transcend himself or herself. Many if

not all contemporary challenges to the Church's view of the person a diametrically opposite approach, advocating self-centered self-satisfaction as the means of human fulfillment, self-satisfaction guided by norms determined by principles established independently of any transcendent guide. The Bible, especially the New Testament, is replete with examples of how human beings transcended themselves as part of the mystery of how Jesus Christ transcended Himself in becoming man. And behind the self-transcendence of Christ is the self-transcendence of the Father. One of the advantages of the approach to Scripture which has characterized the best of the Church's children's use of Scripture down the centuries is the immediate contact which it fosters between the believing persons of the Church and the believing persons of the Bible. It is such immediate contact which has enabled the Church to be aware that the human person is primarily a mystery to contemplate and respect, not simply a puzzle to analyze and decipher. And the reason for this is the link that a faith-filled approach to Scripture senses between the human person and the Divine persons. For the latter are above all mysteries to contemplate and adore.

B) What a Seminarian Should Look for in a Course on Scripture

The seminarian should be fully conversant with the basic reason for the explicit choice of faith as a principle of interpretation, with a firm grasp of the principles involved in the interpretation of Scripture in both the interpretation of the text and the application of this interpretation to his own life, as outlined above. Further, he should be aware of what tradition the professor of any given course is working in.

The seminarian should look for the following three things (among others):

- 1) a deepening of his knowledge of Jesus Christ and how Jesus Christ entered the world of time;
- 2) a deepening of his respect for all persons, human and divine;
- 3) a deepening of his awareness of the gift of faith as a member of the Catholic Church.

But the seminarian also has an obligation to prepare himself for the study of Scripture well before formal course work begins. In particular he should do his courses in philosophy and literature as well as he is able, so that he has the ability to think abstractly about the human person in the context of the universe (philosophy) as well as concretely (literature). Not any philosophy will do—Thomism is recommended above all. Not any literature will do—the great classics of the Western world are

recommended. Homer, Virgil, Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Tolstoy, for example. With this background, contact with the persons of the Bible, both human and Divine, will be facilitated so that the Holy Spirit can work as profoundly and meaningfully as He wishes.

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