

**ON INTERPRETING DOGMAS: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS**

by

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# Notes and Comments

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Many theologians talk about "interpreting" or "reinterpreting" dogmas. Frequently, it seems to me, such talk involves various confusions. A full treatment of the problem would require an extensive historical study and examination of contemporary theories. But my purpose in this paper is modest: to propose a preliminary analysis. I first distinguish several realities that sometimes seem to be confused. Then, taking for granted Catholic faith as theologically normative, I indicate a few senses in which "interpreting dogmas" signifies either a legitimate or an illegitimate activity.

To think and talk soundly about interpreting dogmas, it seems to me that one should distinguish among the following realities.

1) *What is revealed*—the reality revelation makes known. God reveals himself: "divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind" (*Dei filius; Dei verbum*, 6). In revealing himself, God is not merely satisfying human curiosity. Rather, he offers a covenant—and in Jesus a new and lasting covenant—in other words, he reveals himself as a communion of persons inviting human persons to

enter into communion. Thus, what God reveals includes the covenant—the reality of communion to be realized and also our role in its realization:

He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:9-10).

It follows that not all of the revealed reality is uncreated. Part of it is already created and part of it is yet to be created.

Although they are revealed, the central elements, both uncreated and created, of what is revealed—the Trinity, the covenant communion into which we already are reborn, and what we shall later be—remain incomprehensible to us. These realities are inherently mysterious, and no theological reflection even begins to penetrate their mystery. (Indeed, whenever people think they have penetrated the mystery "more deeply" and so are in a position to correct the dogmatic formulations received from tradition, they always propose some perfectly intelligible fantasy to replace divine revelation.)

Plainly, however, being mysterious and being revealed are entirely compatible with one another. So, if the mysteriousness of what is revealed poses any obstacle to its being revealed, received by faith, and handed on through tradition, that obstacle already has been surmounted—by God. It cannot be an obstacle for us. Therefore, to think that dogmas must be reinterpreted

because of the mysteriousness of what is revealed involves a confusion.

2) *Revelation*—the divine undertaking to communicate considered insofar as it is actually accomplished. The divine project of revealing is accomplished by the instrumentality of words and deeds (*DV* 2), most perfectly by all the words and deeds of Jesus' public life. All these words and deeds—indeed, the whole reality of Jesus as *man*—are created realities. As objectively given realities, they are not inherently incomprehensible. They are mysterious only insofar as what is revealed through them is mysterious.

Nonbelievers in Jesus' own day observed his revelatory words and deeds, in some fashion understood them, but did not receive the intended divine communication. The words and deeds which accomplish revelation therefore only do so by constituting a received communication—that is, only insofar as some people take them in and accept them as a communication. So, even in Jesus' lifetime, his words and deeds constituted revelation only insofar as some people not only observed them but accepted Jesus' saying and doing them with faith.

Today, many emphasize that this faith was a personal commitment to Jesus as a person, and that like somewhat similar commitments we make to other people, it involved much more than intellectual acts. I agree. But some of Jesus' words constituted sentences expressing propositions which he asserted and wanted those who listened to him to accept and act on—for example, that the Kingdom of God is at hand. In making commitments to other people,

we also assent to some propositions—for example, when a man and woman marry, they assent to each other's affirmations of love. The faith of Jesus' followers which was a necessary condition for his words and deeds to be revelatory thus included assent to some propositions.

3) *The faith of the Church*—the enduring reality of revelation as a divine communication received and existing within the world. This is the set of habits and acts of the persons in community who make up the Church. The Church's faith began with Abraham, but as specifically Christian it began with the faith of the apostles and those in community with them. If the apostolic community ceased to exist at some time, God's revelation in Jesus would cease to exist within the world. But the faith of the Church exists over time to the present inasmuch as the apostolic community—the Church—continues to exist.

This same reality, considered as continuous over time, is *tradition*: "the Church, in her teaching, life, and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes" (*DV* 8).

The faith of the Church or tradition is not exclusively cognition, for it includes feelings, acts of will, and habits of various sorts as well as acts of cognition. Some of the cognition involved is sensory—for example, the image of the Good Shepherd, the sensory component of the experience of doing the Eucharist in remembrance of Jesus, and so forth. But the faith of the Church also includes assent to some propositions—for example, that the Kingdom of God is at hand, that Jesus is

the Christ, the Son of the living God, and that he will come again.

Infallibility is the sure gift of truth, the work of the Spirit whom Jesus promised and sent to the apostles, by virtue of which their faith embraced all and only what God intended to reveal in Jesus. The faith of the Church continues to be attended by this gift, for otherwise the revelation God intended for all until the end of the age could never reach most people.

4) *Outward expressions of the faith of the Church*—the faith of the Church never existed nor can it ever exist without outward expressions. That is so because the faith of the Church belongs to human persons in community. Human persons are bodily; their spiritual life cannot exist without appropriate embodiment. Moreover, human persons never can live and act together except in and through outward expressions of what they have in common.

Church teaching uses language, religious objects, ritual performances; the life of the Church uses language, gestures, peculiar dress, legal structures, and so on; the worship of the Church uses language, gestures, vestments, performances of rituals, church buildings, and so forth. Material realities used in expressing the faith of the Church constitute her proper culture.

The Bible is a unique element of the Church's cultural heritage. Inspired by the Spirit, it is the primary normative expression of the Church's faith.

All outward expressions of the faith of the Church can be changed from time to time and place to place, insofar as change is necessary for the Church's culture to communicate

with every other culture. For example, the Bible must be translated into different languages and it must be retranslated as changes in languages make older translations less effective expressions of the faith of the Church. Similarly, other elements of the Church's culture can be revised and adapted so that they can effectively express the faith of the Church in different cultures.

5) *Truths of faith*—the propositions held to be true by the faith of the Church. These propositions are the objects of those elements of the faith of the Church which are acts of propositional thinking. (Other elements of the faith of the Church are acts of other sorts, and do not have truths of faith as their objects.) In assenting to truths of faith, those who share in the faith of the Church think the realities which God has revealed to be so—that is, as he has revealed them to be. Some truths of faith always have been objects of acts of belief which are part of the faith of the Church. Such truths are among the Church's earliest memories: "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead . . ." (2 Tim. 2:8).

The Bible includes many sentences which do not express propositions—for example, expressions of feeling, petitions, performative utterances, and so forth. It also contains many sentences which express propositions not asserted by the author of the biblical book—for example, most of the propositions expressed in the dialogues in the book of Job are not asserted by the author. But propositions expressed in the Bible and asserted by the author are asserted by the Holy Spirit and therefore are truths (DV 11). Thus, among the truths of faith are all those as-

served by the authors of the books of the Bible—for example, that the Kingdom is at hand, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, that God raised Jesus from the dead, that Jesus will return.

Due to the ceaseless activity of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the faithful, other truths of faith are developed from time to time out of the faith of the Church. Since the faith of the Church is not limited to cognition, and since its cognitive elements are not exclusively intellectual, much more is implicit in the faith of the Church than can be deduced from it by valid syllogisms. So, new truths of faith emerge which, though closely related to propositional truths of faith already believed, cannot be deduced from them.

For example, the truth of faith that Mary was preserved free from original sin emerged from the faith of the Church. It is closely related to propositional truths of faith already accepted in St. Thomas's day—for example, that Mary is the Mother of God, and that Christ holds primacy in everything—but it cannot be deduced from these or any other truths of faith which were explicitly believed in St. Thomas's day.

6) *Statements of truths of faith*—the sentences (in various languages) which more or less effectively express truths of faith. These must not be confused with the truths of faith themselves, since “the deposit or truths of faith are one thing, the mode in which they are enunciated is another—yet keeping the same meaning and the same position” (GS, 62).

Like any other sentence, a sentence which states a truth of faith cannot express and communicate

that truth without an appropriate context, which delimits the meanings of the words of which the sentence is composed. Thus, there are two senses in which a truth of faith can be enunciated in diverse modes: 1) two or more different sentences having the same meaning can be used to enunciate the same truth; 2) the same sentence can be used but different contexts can be provided to assist in its interpretation.

7) A *dogma*—a complex reality which includes two elements: a truth of faith and the statements (sentences in various languages) which the Magisterium uses in proposing the truth. A third factor, not included in the dogma itself, is necessary to call a truth of faith “dogma”: the acts of the Church's authoritative teachers proposing that truth as something to be believed as divinely revealed.

8) A *defined dogma*—a complex reality whose core is a dogma, but not all dogmas are defined dogmas. For a dogma to become a defined dogma, the Church's Magisterium must do two things: first, perform an act precisely intended to identify the truth of faith involved as revealed and to exclude its contradictory as unacceptable for anyone who wishes to share in the faith of the Church, and second, in doing this provide a canonical formulation (a sentence in a particular language) to serve as a normative statement of that truth of faith.

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The word “interpretation” is not univocal; the problems about interpretation of dogmas cannot be resolved by defining or clarifying some

one thing that "interpretation" means. With respect to the diverse realities distinguished above, there are different senses in which one can talk about an act of "interpretation."

One could say that in revealing himself and the mystery of his will, God interprets (or translates) what he wishes to reveal into human words and into "mighty" deeds (or miraculous events). One also could say that God's revelation in Jesus is a final divine reinterpretation. Since "interpretation" and "reinterpretation" here refer to God's acts, we cannot engage in interpretation and reinterpretation in this sense. It is exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit.

One can say that those who, being enlightened and guided by the Holy Spirit, originally took in and accepted the revelatory words and deeds as a communication from God interpreted what they heard and observed. As revelation progressed, later believers, taught by the Holy Spirit, also reinterpreted the witnesses to earlier revelation in the light of subsequent revelatory words and deeds—for example, the people of apostolic times reinterpreted the revelatory words and deeds witnessed in the (Old Testament) Scriptures, and after Jesus' resurrection the apostolic community reinterpreted various things he had said and done during his public life. Since "interpretation" and "reinterpretation" here refer to human acts contemporaneous with revelatory words and deeds, we cannot in this sense interpret or reinterpret God's revelation in Jesus or his previous partial and preparatory revelation, since we are not contemporaneous with Jesus.

If anyone claims to be in a posi-

tion to reinterpret God's revelation in Jesus in the way the apostolic community reinterpreted God's previous revelation, he or she either implicitly claims to be aware of some new revelatory words and deeds or implicitly claims to have access to what is revealed independently of the words and deeds which God used as his instrumentality in revealing.

If anyone argues that because human concepts and language are limited and cannot encapsulate what is revealed, we must today reinterpret God's revelation in Jesus as the apostolic community reinterpreted God's previous revelation, he or she confuses two distinct things: (1) the transcendence of what is revealed to the words and deeds God uses to reveal, (2) the transcendence of revelatory words and deeds to the faith which interprets them. The apostolic community was able and required to reinterpret previous revelation in the light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection not because of the mysteriousness of what is revealed (which still remains) but because that community received a fresh revelation.

Inasmuch as the faith of the Church (sustained and guaranteed by the Holy Spirit) is the enduring reality of revelation considered as a communication received, this faith as a whole can be called the "interpretation" of the created realities—the words and deeds—by which God revealed. The truths of faith which the Church believes also can be called (in another sense) "interpretations" of some of God's revelatory words and deeds.

Insofar as they are themselves propositional, truths of faith cannot

be interpreted and so cannot be reinterpreted.

However, inasmuch as new propositional truths of faith can be developed with the Holy Spirit's help through the acts of the faith of the Church, one could say that the Church interprets—and even that she reinterprets—her own faith. But if one says this, one must be careful not to confuse this sort of reinterpretation with a supposed reinterpretation of God's revelation in Jesus by a false analogy with the apostolic community's reinterpretation of previous revelation. For in developing new propositional truths of faith, the Church does not pretend to have access to a fresh revelation.

Moreover, the Church need not and cannot go back to the words and deeds which constituted God's revelation in Jesus, and reestablish direct contact with them. Much less can she go back to the reality that God reveals through those words and deeds. Of course, as the Church has constantly and most firmly taught, the four Gospels "faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day he was taken up into heaven" (DV 19). However, the Church accepts and commends the Bible inasmuch as it is an enduring expression of *her own faith*—an expression which only her Magisterium can interpret authoritatively (see DV 10). So, the Church can be said to reinterpret God's revelatory words and deeds only insofar as his revelation already is contained in her own faith and its lasting expressions.

Therefore, while reinterpretation in the sense of the process of making explicit new propositional truths of

faith can develop the faith of the Church, such a reinterpretation cannot contradict anything which the Church previously believed. For if it could, the Church's faith itself would lack self-consistency, and so could not be the continuing reality of God's revelation.

Inasmuch as truths of faith are not isolated from and unrelated to one another but form a coherent though complex whole, they can be said to be "interpreted" in still another sense. By reflecting on the relationships of truths of faith to one another, Christians achieve an increase in understanding analogous to that achieved by rational explanation in any field of natural knowledge (DS 3016/1796). The consideration of any particular truth of faith in such a context can be called an "interpretation" of it; the consideration of the same truth in a somewhat different context can be called its "reinterpretation." In this sense, dogmas can be interpreted and reinterpreted. For example, the dogma concerning papal infallibility which Vatican I defined is reinterpreted in *Lumen gentium* by being considered in relation to other truths of faith concerning the Church.

Inasmuch as statements of truths of faith and other expressions of the faith of the Church are means of communicating that same faith and making it accessible to others, they can be called "interpretations" in still another sense. In this sense, when the Church finds fresh ways of expressing her faith she can be said to "reinterpret" it. Inasmuch as truths of faith which are dogmas are expressed by new statements or in different linguistic contexts suited to limit the meaning of the words of

previous statements, those dogmas can be said to be "reinterpreted."

The preceding explanations can be summed up briefly as follows.

There are three (and probably more) illegitimate senses in which people talk about interpretation or reinterpretation of dogmas.

(1) The attempt to keep the appearance of holding some truth of faith but actually denying it, by keeping the linguistic expression while giving it a different meaning, sometimes is called interpretation of the dogma. This deceptive practice was solemnly condemned by Vatican I (DS 3020/1800, 3043/1818).

(2) Attempts sometimes are made to reinterpret the revelation of God in Jesus as the apostolic community reinterpreted previous revelation in the light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But those who make such attempts implicitly assume (perhaps without their realizing it) that something available today ("contemporary Christian experience," "modern standards of credibility," or something of the sort) is a vehicle for a fresh revelation, which somehow surpasses and improves upon God's revelation in Jesus. That assumption conflicts with Catholic teaching (*DV* 4).

(3) Attempts sometimes are made to interpret revelation (usually as it is witnessed in the Bible) independently of the faith of the Church, with the bad result that some truth of faith is denied. But such attempts implicitly deny that revelation endures in the faith of the Church and assume that her faith is self-contradictory.

Still, there are at least three legitimate senses in which one can talk of interpretation or reinterpretation of dogmas.

(1) New propositional truths of faith are developed. The new truths are closely related to truths of faith already included in dogmas, and such development explicates what had been implicit in the faith of the Church. However, since not everything in the faith of the Church is propositional, interpretation of dogmas in this sense cannot be formulated in syllogisms.

(2) Dogmas are reconsidered in relationship to other truths of faith. For example, Vatican II reconsiders papal primacy in the context of collegiality. In such reinterpretation, the received dogma is not denied, but theological conclusions which had been drawn from it may be falsified.

(3) Dogmas are enunciated in new modes.

It is worth noting that both academic theology and the Magisterium engage in all three of these sorts of interpretation or reinterpretation of dogmas.

However, since dogmas involve both propositions and statements (and defined dogmas include their canonical statements), even legitimate attempts to interpret and reinterpret dogmas (and faithful efforts to talk about these processes) often fall into confusions. One of the worst results of such confusions is to attribute the relativity characteristic of language to propositional truths of faith. Short of this, confused efforts to "reinterpret" dogmas are sure to mix together different undertakings without clearly distinguishing and observing their diverse methodological requirements.

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