

NOTE

REVELATION AND NATURAL LAW

In a response to the 1990 CDF instruction on the theologian's ecclesial vocation, Francis Sullivan asks whether that document supports Umberto Betti's claim that the magisterium can make infallible pronouncements about everything that pertains to the natural moral law, even when the area of natural law treated by the magisterium is not contained in revelation. Sullivan answers in the negative (*TS* 52 [March 1991] 57).

Both Sullivan and Betti presuppose that there are aspects of the natural law that do not pertain to revelation. I call into question that presupposition.

My point is this. In an older theology, revelation was considered to be propositional. With regard to our subject this meant that some aspects of natural law are revealed insofar as these aspects (1) are explicitly proposed in the founts of revelation (Scripture as read in the tradition of the Church), or (2) deducible from what is proposed in these founts, or (3) at least presupposed in the material contained in these same founts. These aspects of natural law were said to be contained in revelation. Other aspects of natural law which are not present in Scripture and tradition are not revealed. Thus, the immorality of murder is a matter of natural law; but it is also revealed in that it is contained in the ten commandments of Scripture. On the other hand, the prohibition of birth control is merely a matter of natural law; it is not contained in the founts of revelation.

In short, the propositional notion of revelation makes it relatively easily to assume that there are some aspects of natural law which are contained in revelation and other aspects which are not.

However, the propositional notion of revelation is no longer tenable. The second article of Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* declares that Christ is "the fullness of revelation." The fourth article states that "Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making himself present and manifesting himself: through his words and deeds, his signs and wonders, but especially through his death and resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth." In this text the phrase "through his whole work of making himself present and manifesting himself" (*tota suiipsius presentia ac manifestatione*) replaced the better "through his whole person" (*tota sua persona*) because some council fathers feared that the word "person" might be read in the older meta-

physical sense of the early councils rather than in the sense of the concrete being who walked this earth.¹

This text indicates that in his risen humanity Christ is the fullness of revelation. As a concrete reality, Christ transcends in meaning any and all propositions that can be articulated of him. Accordingly, this formulation of the council indicates the inadequacy of the propositional notion of revelation.²

Moreover, with the long Christian tradition we must assert that the risen humanity of Christ is also truly and fully human. This indicates that there is nothing essential to humanity which is not found in Christ's humanity. But this would seem to mean that there is nothing essential to the moral life of humans that is not exemplified in a supreme way in Christ. In other words, there cannot be aspects of the natural law binding on all human beings which are not exemplified supremely in Christ's humanity.

In short, both the fullness of humanity and the fullness of revelation are found in the one humanity of the risen Christ. There can be no additional revelation manifested outside that humanity just as there can be no additional natural law not exemplified by that humanity. Accordingly, the presupposition of Sullivan and Betti that there can be aspects of the natural law not contained in revelation appears to be false.

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¹ Nicholas Lash, *Change in Focus* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1973) 10-16.

² After this note had been sent to the editor, Frans Jozef van Beeck's article "Divine Revelation: Intervention or Self-Communication?" appeared in *TS* 52 (June 1991) 199-226. Grounding himself in the position of *Dei Verbum*, Van Beeck lays the foundation for an interpersonal notion of revelation which reveals the inadequacy of a mere cognitive or propositional notion. I find no essential disagreement between his more ample treatment of revelation and my own brief summary of the position of *Dei Verbum*.



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