

Class: God's Desire for Us, Our Desire for God, and Divine Revelation

Objective – *The class objective is to introduce attendees to the major tenets of the Revelation including God's innate desire for us, and our innate desire for God. Students will be expected to engage in conversation surrounding the topic explored in their readings and in the class.*

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

1. Revelation – God's free and loving self-communication, exposing both who he is and his ultimate plan for salvation.
2. Natural Revelation – Knowledge of God accessible through reason, conscience, and observations of creation.
3. Supernatural Revelation – God's direct self-disclosure, that surpasses what human reason alone could discover.
4. Deposit of Faith – The definitive body of truths revealed by God, encompassing both sacred scripture and sacred tradition, entrusted to the Catholic Church and authentically interpreted by the Magisterium (the teaching body, tradition, and texts, of the Church)
5. Sacred Tradition – The living transmission of the Gospel through the Church's teaching, life, and worship.
6. Sacred Scripture – The inspired written word of God, composed by human authors under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
7. Faith – The theological virtue by which we freely assent to God and all he has revealed.
8. Public Revelation – The teachings given to us directly from God made perfect in Jesus Christ.
9. Private Revelation – Supernatural messages, visions, or encounters given to an individual to help people live out the faith in a particular moment in history.
10. Salvation History – The story of God's redeeming work throughout history to save humanity from sin, beginning with creation and culminating in the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Salvation History Summary

The Bible tells the story of God's plan to save human beings from sin and bring them to eternal life. The history of that saving plan as told through the Scriptures is called salvation history. Some people divide the Bible's account of salvation history into eight major periods. Here is a brief description of those periods.

Primeval History

The Bible begins with figurative (also called symbolic or mythic) accounts about how God created everything that exists. These are sometimes called "primeval" stories, meaning they are stories of things that happened before recorded history. The Creation accounts reveal that God's creation was good, ordered, and harmonious, without sin or human death. The story of Adam and Eve's disobedience teaches us that the sin of our first parents injured their relationship with God and with each other. This Original Sin is passed on to all human beings and makes it difficult for us to choose the good and to choose God. The stories of Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel teach us that sin spreads and that without God's help, sin leads to death and destruction. But despite the death and destruction, God has mercy on his creatures and begins a process of intervention to save us.

Patriarchs (and Matriarchs)

The stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs tell how God begins to form a special relationship with a chosen race of people. Most of humanity does not recognize the one true God. So he makes a special promise, called a Covenant, with a man named Abraham and his wife, Sarah. God promises that their descendants will be numerous and that they will inherit a Promised Land. Abraham and Sarah have several crises in which it appears that God's Covenant will go unfulfilled: famine, war, Sarah's barrenness, even an attempt to sacrifice their own son, Isaac. But each time God steps in to ensure that things turn out okay.

The stories of Abraham and Sarah's children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren repeat a pattern of crisis and God's faithfulness. Their son Isaac has difficulty finding a suitable wife. There is sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau that nearly leads to violence. Jacob's older sons sell their youngest brother, Joseph, into slavery. But God leads Joseph to become Pharaoh's right-hand man. In an amazing story of reconciliation and forgiveness, Joseph welcomes back his father and brothers, providing them food and a place to live during another famine. Jacob's sons become the patriarchs—the founding fathers—of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

In the cultural sense, a patriarch is the male leader of a tribal group and is responsible for their survival. The patriarch is a benevolent father figure, exercising unquestioned and absolute decision making in the tribe. The matriarch is his (primary) wife, who leads and has decision-making authority over the women in the tribe. In the religious or ecclesial sense, the patriarchs are the original ancestors of the Jewish faith—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons—who were chosen by God to lead his Chosen People.



Egypt and the Exodus

The third period of salvation history concerns the liberation of Jacob's descendants—now called Israelites—from slavery in Egypt. At the beginning of the Book of Exodus, we discover that the Israelites are in slavery in Egypt. God hears their cries and calls Moses to lead the people out of slavery. But Pharaoh, the Egyptian leader who is also seen by his people as a god, has a hard heart. In a contest of wills between “gods,” Yahweh proves his might over Pharaoh by sending terrible plagues upon the Egyptians. The Israelites’ escape from Egypt and journey to the Holy Land is called the Exodus.

On the way to the Promised Land, the Israelites stop at Mount Sinai. There the key event in Jewish salvation history occurs. In a dramatic theophany (appearance of God), God extends the Covenant he made with Abraham to all the Israelites. He gives Moses the Law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, which the people must obey as a sign of their commitment to the Covenant.

During the Exodus the people frequently complain and lose their faith in God. As a consequence they must wander in the desert for forty years, and only their children will be able to enter the Promised Land (with two exceptions, Joshua and Caleb).

Settling the Promised Land

The fourth period of salvation history concerns the Israelites’ conquest of the Promised Land. Moses dies before the Israelites enter the Promised Land. God calls Moses’ right-hand man, Joshua (“Jesus” is another form of his name), to lead the people into the land, much of which is inhabited by other people. The Israelites must fight to gain control of the land. When they trust God, they are successful in their battles; when they do not trust God, they fail. Eventually they gain control of the land, and Joshua divides the land between the twelve tribes.

New invaders try to capture the land. At this time the Israelites have no king, because God is their ruler. A pattern develops: (1) the Israelites forget about God and are unfaithful to the Covenant; (2) they suffer at the hands of invaders; (3) they cry out to God for help; (4) God calls special leaders and warriors, called judges, to help deliver justice and defend the land against the invaders; (5) life is good for a while until the Israelites lapse into unfaithfulness and the cycle begins again. Deborah, Gideon, and Samson are some of the more famous judges. Unfortunately, with each cycle the violence gets worse and the judges are less holy. The Book of Judges ends with a horrible rape that leads to a civil war in which the whole tribe of Benjamin is slaughtered except for six hundred men.

Kingdoms of Judah and Israel

The next period of salvation history is typically referred to as the monarchy. Eventually the Israelites want their own king. God reluctantly answers their plea. He has Samuel—the last of the judges—anoint Saul as the first king of Israel. At the same time, Samuel warns the people of the dangers of kings and empires. Saul has many problems and is eventually killed in battle. David follows Saul as the second king. David is a mighty warrior and unites all the tribes into one kingdom. After David’s death, one of his sons, Solomon, builds a temple at Jerusalem, the capital city. Despite their many positive accomplishments, both David and Solomon are guilty of many sins in building their empire, succumbing to the temptations of violence, sex, and power.

After Solomon’s death there is disagreement among the tribes, and the kingdom splits in two. Israel is the name of the northern kingdom, and Judah is the name of the southern kingdom. Many of the kings



of Israel and Judah worship foreign gods and allow injustice in the kingdom. So God calls prophets to tell the people to obey their Covenant with God. Prophets like Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah call the people to stop worshipping idols, to practice justice, to worship God with integrity, and to care for people in need. The sayings of the “writing prophets” are collected and become part of the Jewish Scriptures.

Several kings in Judah—particularly Hezekiah and Josiah—attempt religious reform and strive to end the worship of indigenous gods and goddesses, tearing down the high places and sacred groves where they are worshipped. It is likely that a significant portion of the Jewish Scriptures—the books Deuteronomy through Second Kings—are initially collected, written, and edited during their reigns.

Exile and Return

Despite the prophets’ warnings, the people of Israel and Judah continue to turn away from God’s Covenant with them. So God lets their kingdoms be conquered and their rulers overthrown. The Assyrians conquer Israel in 721 BC. The Babylonians conquer Judah in 587 BC. Many of the people are taken into captivity, so this period of salvation history is called the Exile. Prophets like Ezekiel and Second Isaiah comfort the Israelites with the promise that God is still with them. These great prophets also hint at the future coming of a just, gentle, and suffering servant-king who will lead the people back to God.

The Exile is a key event in Jewish salvation history. During and after the Exile, the Israelites rewrite much of their sacred Scriptures. They now believe that their special relationship with God is not centered on being a nation with a king. Their identity is primarily a religious identity centered on following the Mosaic Law, with an emphasis in the offering of ritual sacrifice at the Temple.

Fifty years pass in exile. Then a new Persian king allows the people—now called Judeans, or Jews—to return to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell how the people saw God’s hand at work during the struggles and successes they experienced in this process.

When Alexander the Great comes along, the Greeks come to rule over Israel. One of the Greek governors tries to establish Greek culture and religion in Israel and put statues of Greek gods in the Temple. In response around 150 BC a Jewish family, the Hasmoneans (also called the Maccabees), lead a successful revolt against the Greeks to restore Jewish independence. During this troubled time, the common people hope for a messiah, or savior, to make them great again. New Jewish groups—the Essenes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees—arise during this time. Each group emphasizes a different approach to faithfully living the Jewish faith.

Life of Jesus Christ

God never abandons his Chosen People, even though so often they do not keep their part of the Covenant. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell of how, when the time is right, God sends his only Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. This is the ultimate event in salvation history. Jesus Christ, the Word Made Flesh, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the complete and final revelation of God’s saving plan.

When Jesus is born, the Romans rule Israel. Some of the Jews are hoping for a mighty warrior and king like David, who will drive the Romans out. Instead, Jesus shows a different way. He preaches love, justice, and forgiveness. He heals and works miracles as signs of God’s power.

Jesus’ followers, called disciples, come to see that he is the Messiah, the Savior. Simon Peter is designated by Jesus to become the leader of twelve of Jesus’ closest male disciples, who become known as the Twelve Apostles. Mary Magdalene seems to be a leader among a group of women disciples who



follow Jesus and support his ministry. Jesus shows his disciples that salvation comes through faith and a change of heart, not through violence and political power.

When Jesus is killed by the Romans—at the urging of the Jewish leaders—his followers think all is lost. Instead after three days God raises Jesus from the dead! Christ's Resurrection affirms that Jesus is the Son of God, affirms that everything he taught is true, and affirms that through Christ sin and death are conquered forever. All the baptized who put their faith in Jesus Christ will share in his Resurrection. God's original plan for creation is now brought full circle as we anticipate the fullness of the Kingdom of God in which perfect goodness, harmony, love, and joy will be present for all eternity.

Early Christian Church

The final period of salvation history concerns the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the growth of the Church after Jesus' Ascension. After his Resurrection, Jesus instructs his closest followers, the Apostles, to go and spread the Good News of salvation to all people. After Jesus ascends to Heaven, Peter and the other Apostles receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives them the courage to tell others about Jesus Christ. They start by first preaching to other Jews. Sometimes the Apostles are persecuted by Jewish leaders who see them as blasphemers to the true Jewish faith.

Paul—one of those persecutors—has a vision of Jesus and becomes a follower of the Way (a name for early Christianity). God reveals to Paul that Christ came for all people. Paul begins preaching to non-Jews, who are called Gentiles. Wherever he and his missionary partners travel, they start new Christian communities. Many other believers, both women and men, are part of this missionary work—people like Barnabas, Timothy, Phoebe, Junia, Priscilla, and Aquila. These early missionaries write many letters of instruction, correction, and encouragement to Christian communities and Christian leaders. Soon Christianity spreads throughout the whole Roman Empire, even to Rome itself.

Some Important People in Salvation History

Primeval History

- Adam and Eve
- Cain and Abel
- Noah

Patriarchs

- Abraham and Sarah
- Isaac and Rebekah
- Jacob, Leah, and Rachel
- Joseph and his brothers
- Egypt and the Exodus
- Moses
- Pharaoh
- Miriam and Aaron



Settling the Promised Land

- Joshua
- Deborah
- Gideon
- Samson
- Ruth

Kingdoms of Judah and Israel

- Samuel
- King Saul
- King David
- King Solomon
- King Hezekiah
- King Josiah
- Elijah and Elisha
- Amos
- Hosea
- Isaiah
- Jeremiah

Exile and Return

- Ezekiel
- Ezra and Nehemiah
- Esther
- The Maccabees

Life of Jesus Christ

- Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ
- Mary of Nazareth
- John the Baptist
- Peter
- Mary Magdalene

Early Christian Church

- Peter
- Paul
- Barnabas
- Timothy
- Priscilla and Aquila



Understanding God's Revelation: A Beginner's Guide to Scripture and Tradition

Introduction: The God Who Reaches Out First

Welcome! At the heart of Christian belief is a profound and encouraging idea: God is not distant or aloof. He desires a relationship with each of us and, in His love, He "makes the first move" to connect with humanity. Understanding how He has done this is one of the most exciting first steps in a mature spiritual life. This document is designed to help you understand the foundational concepts of how God reveals Himself, providing a clear map for navigating some of Christianity's most important ideas.

This divine initiative, this act of God showing Himself to us, is called **Revelation**.

1. What is Divine Revelation?

In simple terms, Divine Revelation is God unveiling truths about Himself and His will for our lives—truths that we could not possibly discover on our own. Using classic arguments from natural reason, we might be able to deduce that a "first cause" or a "prime mover" must exist to account for the universe. But we could never guess the deepest mysteries of God's own inner life without Him telling us about them.

Two perfect examples of this are:

- **The Trinity:** The truth that God is one God in three divine persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- **The Incarnation:** The truth that God the Son became human in the person of Jesus Christ, the "Word become flesh."

Insight: Revelation isn't just a list of facts or secret information. It is God's answer to the deepest questions of the human heart. He reveals Himself, in the classic words of the Baltimore Catechism, "so that we can know, love, and serve God in this life, so that we can spend eternity with Him in eternal life." It is an invitation into a real, personal relationship with Him.

So, if God has revealed these incredible truths, how have they been passed down faithfully through the centuries?

2. The Two Channels of God's Revelation

God's Revelation is transmitted to us through two distinct but deeply connected channels: Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture. They flow from the same divine source—Jesus Christ Himself—and work together to communicate God's truth.

2.1 Sacred Tradition: The Living Voice of Faith

Before anything was written down, the faith was spoken, lived, and passed on from person to person. This is the essence of Sacred Tradition.

The word **Tradition** comes from the Latin word *tradere*, which means "to hand on." Sacred Tradition is the faithful handing on of God's revelation from one generation to the next, a process that began with Jesus's apostles. This creates "an unbroken line of belief and teaching in the church that dates back to the apostles." They experienced Jesus directly, and their teachings and experiences formed an oral tradition that guided the early Church.

Think of it like a family passing down important stories and memories about grandparents and great-grandparents. These stories, shared orally long before they might ever be written in a journal, preserve the living memory and identity of the family. In the same way, the oral tradition of the Church preserved the living memory of Christ.

2.2 Sacred Scripture: The Inspired Word of God

Sacred Scripture—the Bible—developed *from* Sacred Tradition. As the oral tradition was passed on, the Holy Spirit inspired certain individuals to write it down for future generations. The word "inspire" literally means "breathing into," a beautiful image of the Holy Spirit guiding the human authors. For this reason, the Church understands that God is the ultimate author of the Bible.

Here are the key principles of biblical inspiration:

- **Primary Author:** God is the primary author of Scripture. The message is His.
- **Human Instruments:** God worked through human authors, using them as instruments to write His message, much like a writer uses a pencil.
- **Preserved Style:** The human authors were not mere robots. They retained their own unique personalities and writing styles. This is why the Gospels of Mark and John, for example, have different tones and points of emphasis while still communicating God's inspired truth.

The Catholic Bible is composed of 73 books, divided into two main sections:

Structure of the Catholic Bible	Testament	Number of Books	Core Content
Old Testament	46	The story of revelation from creation until the time of Christ.	New Testament
27	The life of Jesus, the Acts of the Apostles, letters, and the book of Revelation.		

2.3 How Scripture and Tradition Work Together

It is essential to understand this key insight: "**Scripture is a product of tradition.**" The living, oral tradition of the Church existed *before* the books of the New Testament were written. The written word emerged from the spoken word. However, this is a two-way relationship: **Tradition is confirmed through Scripture.**

Scripture and tradition are not opposed, but they spring from the one source of Christ, Jesus Himself.

The two work in harmony. Scripture is understood within the context of the living Tradition that produced it. Furthermore, the Bible itself tells us that it doesn't contain every single thing Jesus said and did. As John 20:30 notes, "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book."

If Scripture and Tradition are the channels of God's truth, how can we be sure they haven't been distorted or misinterpreted over 2,000 years?

3. The Guardian of Revelation: The Magisterium

To protect His revelation from error, Jesus established a living teaching authority in His Church. This is called the **Magisterium**, a word that comes from the Latin for "teacher." The Magisterium is the official teaching authority held by the Pope and the bishops, who are the successors of the apostles.

The primary role of the Magisterium is to be the faithful servant and safeguard of Scripture and Tradition, ensuring they are interpreted correctly and passed on without error. Jesus promised the apostles that the Holy Spirit would be with them "until the end of the age" to guide them in this task.

Key Distinction: The Office vs. The Person The Church teaches that the Holy Spirit protects the *official teaching* of the Magisterium from error. This does not mean that individual popes, bishops, or priests are personally perfect or free from sin. History shows many examples of their human failings. The promise of protection applies to the teaching office, not the personal holiness of the men holding it.

A powerful historical example of this protection is the story of St. Athanasius. In the 4th century, a widespread heresy known as Arianism (which taught that Jesus was not truly God) became so popular that a majority of the Church's bishops accepted it. St. Athanasius stood so firm in defending the true teaching that he became a living embodiment of the famous Latin phrase *Athanasius contra mundum* ("**Athanasius against the world**"). Ultimately, the Holy Spirit guided the Church to affirm the correct doctrine at the Council of Nicaea, proving that the truth would be safeguarded even when many of its leaders fell into error.

Safeguarding the truth, however, does not mean our understanding of it remains frozen in time.

4. Our Understanding Grows: The Development of Doctrine

This concept, famously explained by Saint John Henry Newman, is called the **Development of Doctrine**. The core idea is that the truths of revelation given by Jesus do not change, but our *understanding* of them can deepen and mature over time, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Newman was an Anglican priest who, in the process of studying early Church history, came to understand this principle. His deep dive into the roots of Christianity led him to convert to Catholicism and famously conclude: **"to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant."**

A helpful analogy is to imagine that Jesus gave the Church a "big sack of revelation" at the very beginning. Everything is there from the start. Throughout history, the Church continues to pull things out of that sack, look at them in a new light, and understand them more deeply.

For example, at the Council of Nicaea, the Church needed to combat the Arian heresy with precision. To explain the unchanging truth that Jesus is fully God, the council developed new philosophical language, declaring that Jesus is **"consubstantial"** with the Father—meaning He is of the very same substance or being as God the Father. The truth itself wasn't new, but the Church's language and understanding had developed to express it more clearly.

This entire process of God revealing Himself invites a response from us.

5. Our Response to Revelation: The Gift of Faith

The proper human response to God's revelation is **faith**. Faith is not a blind guess or wishful thinking; it is best described as "a sure knowledge of what we can't see."

God's gift of Revelation is so profound because, as St. Thomas Aquinas noted, unaided human reason can only discover truths about God "after much time with great difficulty and a great admixture of error." Revelation is God's clear, reliable, and direct path, saving us from confusion and error. We exercise a natural form of faith every day without thinking about it. For example:

- You have faith that your car is still in the parking lot where you left it.
- You believe that a country like India exists, even if you have never been there, based on the reliable witness of others.

Supernatural faith in God is similar but far more certain. Why? Because the certainty of our faith depends on the reliability of the witness. In Christian faith, our witness is God Himself, "who can neither deceive nor be deceived." This makes the truths of faith the most certain knowledge we can possess.

Faith, therefore, is our confident and grateful "yes" to the God who loved us enough to reveal Himself, providing a knowledge more certain than anything we can see with our own eyes.

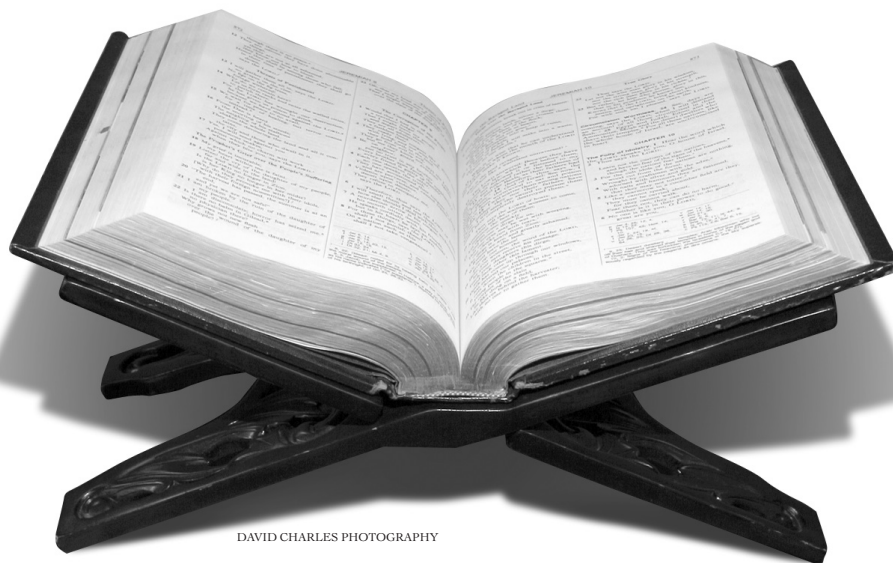
The Deposit of Faith

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. ~ 1 Timothy 6:20-21

GOD HAS MADE HIMSELF and his purposes regarding all human life abundantly clear. He has revealed those truths that we must know and believe in order to be what he created us to be. His Word has been delivered to us in written and oral form through human agents. As well, all of divine Revelation can be summed up and is personified in Jesus, since he is *"the way, and the truth, and the life"* (Jn 14:6) for us and *"no one comes to the Father, but by"* him (Jn 14:6; see also Jn 5:39). All that Jesus taught and did has been handed down to us in the unbroken line of apostolic tradition. This is in obedience to Jesus' "great commission" to the eleven faithful apostles: *"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age'"* (Mt 28:18-20).

The sacred deposit of Revelation, then, is to be found in God's Word as it is written in Sacred Scripture, preserved orally in Sacred Tradition, and guarded and authentically interpreted by those apostles and their successors. The living teaching office of the Church exercised by these men (the pope and bishops in communion with him) is called the Magisterium. The shepherds of the Church, immediately following their apostolic predecessors, have faithfully guarded and still teach the entire written and oral content of divine Revelation (the Christian message), as they are guided by the help of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul exhorts Timothy to *"[f]ollow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us"* (2 Tm 1:13-14). The deposit of the faith is this sacred deposit of Revelation left to the Church by Jesus Christ.

The deposit of faith is like a treasure which has been



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

"The deposit of faith is like a treasure which has been entrusted to the Church and from which the Church draws all her life and teaching."

entrusted to the Church and from which the Church draws all her life and teaching. This treasure of God's Word is Jesus Christ, the Word who *"became flesh and dwelt among us"* (Jn 1:14), whose voice continues to reach us through the voice of the Church who authentically proclaims the truths of salvation revealed by him. Therefore, all the doctrines she proposes for belief are either contained in this deposit of faith or necessarily connected to it. The Church's formulation of these doctrines puts human words to the revealed truths of this living deposit of Revelation and helps us "to express the faith and to hand it on, to celebrate it in community, to assimilate and live on it more and more" (CCC 170).

Down through the centuries, the Church has faithfully guarded this rich deposit and kept it free from corruption and error. The faith is one and the same faith as that received by the apostles. There is no other Gospel or further revelation after Jesus Christ because he is the eternal Word and *"in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell"* (Col 1:19). The Church takes seriously the warning of Scripture concerning the preaching of a different Gospel: *"But even if we, or an angel from Heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed"* (Gal 1:8).

While no changes have occurred in the faith at the level of essentials, development and growth in our understanding of it has occurred necessarily. "Thanks to the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the understanding of both the realities and the words of the heritage of faith is able to grow in the life of

the Church" (CCC 94). The Church must seek to deepen her understanding of this heritage and be renewed by it so that, in turn, the message of the Gospel which she preaches can penetrate more deeply the human spirit while holding fast to the timeless truths contained in this sacred deposit.

Not only the passage of time but also diverse cultures and peoples make it necessary for the Church to express the richness of the faith in different ways. This is a sign of the Church's catholicity, which bears witness to the power of the Gospel to transform and inculturate all peoples while preaching the same message "in which one and the

same way of salvation appears throughout the whole world"¹ (CCC 174). For *"[t]here is one body and one Spirit, ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all"* (Eph 4:4-6).

(CCC 84-95, 170-175)



*Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well,
6th century ivory panel on bishop's chair in Ravenna, Italy*

***"All that Jesus taught and did
has been handed down to us in the
unbroken line of apostolic tradition."***

¹ St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haeres.* 5, 20, 1 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 7/2, 1177 (Paris, 1857-1866)

Twelve Things to Know About Private Revelation

By: Jimmy Akin

1. Why are they called “private” revelations?

The term *private* is widely acknowledged to be misleading, and some sources use other terms. The Council of Trent, for example, used the term “special revelation.”

Whatever term one prefers, the idea is to distinguish these revelations from the body of revelation found in Sacred Scripture and Tradition. That revelation is binding on the entire Church throughout all its history. It is thus sometimes called *public revelation* because it is directed to everyone in the Church.

Private revelation by contrast is directed to a narrower audience. It may be directed to a single person, to a group of people, or even to the entire Church in a particular age, but it is not directed to all of the Church throughout history.

2. Are there private revelations in the Bible?

It depends on what you mean. At least today, everything in the Bible is part of public revelation. However, this wasn’t necessarily the case in the beginning.

For example, when Jesus appeared to St. Paul on the Damascus road (Acts 9), this was not a revelation directed to the entire Church at the time. It was a revelation given to Paul and, to some extent, was also perceived by those around him (cf. Acts 22:9).

As a result, some authors classify this kind of personal experience as a private revelation (cf. Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 19), even though it is found in the Bible. The record of this event then became part of public revelation when St. Luke wrote the book of Acts.

3. Who may appear in an apparition?

Hypothetically, anyone at all. God could give a person a vision of anyone he chooses—even people who don’t personally exist.

For example, in Acts 16:9, “a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’” This vision motivated Paul to make a missionary trip to Macedonia.

Luke doesn’t tell us how Paul knew the man was Macedonian. He may have been in Macedonian dress, he may have had a Macedonian accent, or Paul may have just known that he was Macedonian (as we sometimes “just know” things in dreams).

What is significant is that Luke doesn’t give us any indication that Paul ever met this man in the flesh, and that’s the kind of thing we would expect him to record. It would be an amazing

confirmation of the revelation if Paul had met the exact man he saw in the vision, but Luke never says that he did.

It's most likely that the Macedonian man was a symbol of the people of his homeland and their need for evangelization. He would be like the figures who appear in Jesus' parables. They're not meant to be historical individuals but symbols that convey important messages.

On the other hand, real, living individuals may also appear, as when Paul saw that Ananias would come to restore his sight (Acts 9:11-12).

4. Who most commonly appears in apparitions?

Both in the Bible and in Church history, the most common figures are God, his angels, and the saints.

In the Bible, God appears to Old Testament prophets such as Moses (Exod. 33:18-34:7), Isaiah (Isa. 6:1), Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1, 26-28), and Daniel (Dan. 7:9).

Historically, Catholic theologians have debated whether these Old Testament appearances were "personal" or not. Benedict XIV stated, "According to the general opinion of theologians, the apparitions of God under the Old Law were not personal, but, as they say, impersonal: for God himself did not assume a body and appear, but he did that by the ministry of angels who represented him" (cf. John 1:18, Gal. 3:19, 1 John 4:12).

However, Benedict also notes that some believe these were appearances of the pre-incarnate Christ in visible form. Various Church Fathers identified one particular angel—referred to as "the Angel of the Lord" (Gen. 16:7-13) or sometimes as "the Angel of Great Council" (Isa. 9:6, Septuagint)—as a manifestation of the pre-incarnate Christ (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 76, 126, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:16:3).

Other angels appear in multiple instances, often in human appearance (Gen. 19:1, John 20:12, cf. Luke 24:4), though not always (Isa. 6:2, Ezek. 1:5-11, Dan. 10:5-6). Sometimes angels appear in great multitudes (Luke 2:13-14, Rev. 5:11).

Departed saints also appear. Samuel appears to the witch of Endor (1 Sam. 28:11-19). Some have proposed that, because mediumship was forbidden (Lev. 20:27, Deut. 18:11), this was not really Samuel but a demon. But the biblical text refers to the spirit as Samuel, and he gives a genuine prophecy to King Saul. Also, Sirach 46:20 confirms that it was Samuel who, after his death, "revealed to the king his death and lifted up his voice out of the earth in prophecy."

The deceased high priest Onias and the prophet Jeremiah also appear to Judah Maccabee in a vision (2 Macc. 15:11-16).

Finally, in Revelation 12:1-5, John sees a woman who gives birth to Christ, identifying her as the Virgin Mary (though the figure contains other layers of symbolism).

Throughout the Church age, God, the angels, and saints have continued to appear, and apparitions of the Virgin Mary have been particularly common.

5. Can demons appear?

In the Old Testament, God at one point allows a lying spirit to deceive a group of prophets (1 Kings 22:21-23), and the New Testament warns that not every spirit is of God, so spirits need to be tested (1 John 4:1; cf. 1 Thess. 5:19-21). Paul also states that the devil disguises himself “as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14).

Among the tests that the Bible gives for detecting lying spirits are whether they deny that Christ has come in the flesh (1 John 4:2-3) and whether they preach a different gospel (Gal. 1:8-9).

A more generalized version of this test is that an apparition is to be regarded as false if it contains anything that is contrary to official Church teaching (CDF, *Norms*).

6. Can souls in purgatory, or even the souls of the damned, appear?

The common opinion is that they can. After commenting on how the souls of saints can appear to people, St. Thomas Aquinas states, “It is also credible that this may occur sometimes to the damned, and that for man’s instruction and intimidation they be permitted to appear to the living; or again in order to seek our suffrages, as to those who are detained in purgatory” (ST III-II:69:3).

Regarding the souls of the damned, Benedict XIV notes that, although the devil sometimes appears in the form of a beast or monster, “the souls of the dead, although of the damned, when, by the permission of God they appear to the living, assume that form by which they are known”—that is, the form that they had in life.

7. How would “bodily” visions work, where the seer’s physical eyes and ears detect spiritual beings that don’t have bodily form?

This could happen a number of ways (e.g., God or his agents causing light and sound waves for the physical senses to detect). However, a theory that has been popular historically is the idea that spiritual beings may assume “aerial bodies” that temporarily condense out of air.

Benedict XIV says that “bodies which become visible to human eyes—I mean aerial bodies—ought to be easily made and formed, and to admit of human color, and when they are laid aside, or dissolved, to leave nothing behind which the eyes of the bystanders can discern.”

8. If the Church has approved an apparition, are we bound to accept it?

No. In 2010, Benedict XVI explained:

Ecclesiastical approval of a private revelation essentially means that its message contains nothing contrary to faith and morals; it is licit to make it public and the faithful are authorized to give to it their prudent adhesion. A private revelation can introduce new emphases, give rise to

new forms of piety, or deepen older ones. It can have a certain prophetic character and can be a valuable aid for better understanding and living the Gospel at a certain time; consequently, it should not be treated lightly. It is a help which is proffered, but its use is not obligatory (*Verbum Domini* 14).

In the 1700s, Benedict XIV observed that the Church accepts these revelations only “as probable” and added, “It follows that anyone may, without injury to the Catholic faith, give no heed to these revelations, and differ from them, provided he does so modestly, not without reason, and without contempt.”

The lack of contempt is needed because one needs to show respect to the Church authorities who approved them, but if one thinks there is a good reason not to accept a particular, approved apparition, the Church holds that one is free to do so.

9. If a saint has been canonized, does that mean the Church approves of the apparitions he reported?

It does not. The Church has a separate process—described in the CDF’s *Norms*—for approving apparitions. The fact that someone has been canonized does not mean that this process has been used.

On the other hand, if a saint claimed to have received revelations that were heretical, he would not have been canonized. One may presume that the visions a saint reported didn’t contradict Church teaching, at least as far as it was developed in his own day.

Further, the Church assumes that God was at work in the saint’s life in at least a general way, including in revelations the saint reported receiving. But this does not mean that every particular revelation he or she reported or that every detail in them was genuine.

John Paul II expressed this when commenting on St. Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373): “There is no doubt that the Church, which recognized Bridget’s holiness without ever pronouncing on her individual revelations, has accepted the overall authenticity of her interior experience” (*Motu Proprio*, Oct. 1, 1999, n. 5).

The Church thus recognizes the authenticity of Bridget’s inner experience in a general way without pronouncing on the validity of the individual revelations she reported.

10. Can you always trust that a particular text of a revelation is genuine?

Sometimes—either due to hoax or simple error—revelations get attributed to seers that they never experienced. Catholics in every century have needed to guard against accepting such apocryphal texts as genuine.

Benedict XIV noted that “the revelation ascribed by some to Blessed Colette, is considered apocryphal, in which it is said that St. Anne had three husbands.”

More recently, the CDF warned bishops about a booklet containing fifteen prayers and promises attributed to St. Bridget of Sweden which are not found in her authentic writings: “Since it is asserted in this pamphlet that God made to St. Bridget certain promises, whose supernatural origin is uncertain, let local ordinaries take care not to grant permission for publishing or reprinting pamphlets or other writings which contain these promises” (Notification, Jan. 28, 1954).

11. Can a person who has received authentic revelations later, unintentionally, think he is receiving a revelation when he isn’t?

Yes. Benedict XIV notes that, “sometimes the holy prophets, when consulted, from the frequent practice of prophecy, utter some things of their own spirit, suspecting them to proceed from the spirit of prophecy.”

It is thus possible that “a saint may have revelations, not from the Holy Spirit, but resulting from his own individual judgment and reasonings, so far as his intellect, influenced by pious dispositions and, imbued with opinions on any subject connected with religion, judges that he has the divine spirit when, however, he is in invincible error.”

A person, even one who has previously received revelations, thus may innocently think God is speaking through him when he is not.

12. If someone receives a genuine revelation, does that mean every detail he sees is authentic?

No. Commenting on St. Bridget, John Paul II noted, “Even the experiences of the great saints are not free of those limitations which always accompany the human reception of God’s voice.”

This means that the seer’s own consciousness may slip in details. The CDF’s *Norms* state that, although a genuine revelation will not contain doctrinal error, one must take into account “the possibility that the subject might have added, even unconsciously, purely human elements or some error of the natural order to an authentic supernatural revelation.”

Benedict XIV adds that “it may happen that a saint may think, from pre-conceived opinions and from fixed ideas in the imagination, that certain things are revealed to him by God, which yet God does not reveal. . . . Raptures may be above nature, and in their substance divine, but in their circumstances conformed to the ideas naturally received, which God leaves in the state they are in, since it was of no moment [to the] end he had in view.”

As examples, Benedict mentions “revelations of holy women in which Christ appeared nailed with three nails to the Cross, sometimes with four and also those in which St. Jerome stands with a lion or St. James appears in the dress of a pilgrim.”

Benedict goes on to suggest that God’s real purpose in showing people visions of Jesus being crucified is to help them love Christ and meditate on what he did for us, not to teach them the precise number of nails that were used— imagination of the seer supplying that detail.

Similarly, St. Jerome is often depicted in art with a lion, and St. James is often depicted in art dressed as a pilgrim. Benedict says Jerome didn't really own a lion, and James is depicted as a pilgrim because people often make pilgrimages in his honor in France. But these images are how people are used to visualizing these saints, so that's how they sometimes appear in visions.

We thus need to be careful in discerning private revelations and heed St. Paul's dictum: "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thess. 5:19-21).

Sidebar: Key Documents

Finding authoritative books on private revelations is sometimes difficult, but here are key resources you should consult to study the topic in depth.

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: See paragraphs 65-67 for a brief, authoritative discussion of public and private revelation.
- *Dei Verbum*: This Vatican II document is the most authoritative discussion of revelation today. It focuses on public revelation.
- *Heroic Virtue*: This is the English title of a work by Pope Benedict XIV (r. 1740-1758) on beatifications and canonizations. Since it was written before he was pope, it is not a text of the Magisterium, but it is considered the classic exposition of these topics, and it extensively discusses private revelations (see especially vol. 3, ch. 11-14).
- *The Message of Fatima*: A collection of documents issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in 2000. It deals specifically with the 1917 apparitions at Fatima, Portugal, but it also contains principles applicable to private revelations in general.
- *Norms Regarding the Manner of Proceeding in the Discernment of Presumed Apparitions or Revelations*: A document the CDF issued in 1978. It describes the process by which bishops are to investigate reported apparitions. It was originally released privately to bishops, but it was leaked, and in 2011 the CDF published it on its website.
- *Verbum Domini*: An apostolic exhortation by Benedict XVI (r. 2005-2013) that contains the most recent, authoritative statement on private revelations (n. 14).