

THE HISTORIC AND DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT
OF REVELATION
ACCORDING TO SAINT THOMAS

*God, who at sundry times and
in divers manners spoke in
times past to the fathers in the
prophets, last of all in these
days hath spoken to us by his
Son.* Heb. 1, 1-2.

IN THESE words, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews briefly recalls the long historic process whereby men received divine instructions through the ages. God in fact did not disclose to us all his secrets in a single all-embracing revelation, but, wisely adapting himself to our receptive capabilities, he imparted the knowledge of his mysteries to us gradually and progressively. In the development of divine revelation, St. Thomas distinguishes two kinds of progress, namely the historic on the one hand, and the doctrinal on the other. It is the purpose of the present study to reconstruct his thought on both of them respectively.

I. THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF REVELATION

Revelation, one may say, started with the creation of man. The book of Genesis represents God as conversing with Adam both before and after the fall. Man in the state of original justice had, no doubt, a much more perfect natural knowledge of God than is possible to us after the loss of that state; but he also had faith in some supernatural mysteries,¹ which he could not have learned except through revelation.

Apart from the revelations granted to Adam, those made by God to others between Adam's first sin and the coming of Christ are divided by St. Thomas according to three main ages or periods, corresponding to the three different states of man's supernatural history on earth. These periods are: the time before the Law; the time under the Law; the time

¹ Cf. II Sent., d. 29, a. 3; De Ver., q. 18, a. 3; I, q. 95, a. 3; II-II, q. 5, a. 1.

of grace.²

The time before the Law.

After man's fall from original justice, there followed a period of silence on the part of God. St. Thomas recalls only the communication made to Noah at the time of the deluge.³ After that he mentions numerous others made to many different persons at various times. He also notes that the distribution of revelations over a long period of time helped to establish revealed religion on a firm basis, and that God's repeated instructions were useful and necessary to prepare man's mind to accept the high mysteries that were to be disclosed on Christ.

The first revelation before the Law, says the Holy Doctor, was made to Abraham.⁴ It ushers in the Patriarchal Period, and coincides with God's choice of a peculiar People. It was made at the time of the beginning of the Assyrian kingdom,⁵ when widespread idolatry, hitherto unheard of, had made it imperative to recall men back to the cult of the one true God. Consequently Abraham, and later Isaac and Jacob 'were instructed in a general way on the omnipotence of one God'.⁶ The main stress of these revelations was thus laid on monotheism to counteract idolatry; but St. Thomas notes also that the first promise of Christ was made to Abraham.⁷ A peculiar characteristic of the revelations to the Patriarchs is the limited number of the addressees for whom they were intended; revelation was made only 'to special persons and some families'.⁸ That made to Abraham was at the basis of the rest; for this reason St. Thomas considers it as more excellent. So before the Law we have only a few revelations, addressed only to a small group of families, and mainly stressing the oneness of God.

The time under the Law.

The latter part of the stay of the Chosen People in Egypt, their exodus, their crossing of the Red Sea, and the journey to the Promised Land are dominated by the strong personality of Moses, whom for various reasons St. Thomas considers as the greatest prophet.⁹ By means of an angel God gave him

² II-II, q. 174, a. 6c.

³ Cf. In Heb., c. 1 lect. 1.

⁴ II-II, q. 174, a. 6c.

⁵ Ibid. ad 2, quoting ST AUGUSTINE, *De Civ. Dei*, bk. 18, c. 27: PL 41.584.

⁶ II-II, q. 174, a. 6c.

⁷ III, q. 4, a. 6 ad 3.

⁸ II-II, q. 174, a. 6c.

⁹ II-II, q. 174, a. 4; De Ver., q. 12, a. 9 ad 1; a. 14; In Is., c. 6.

the Law. He admitted him to great familiarity, and used to speak with him face to face as with a friend (Ex. 33, 11). To him God revealed the splendour of his majesty, granting him, St. Thomas says, an intuitive vision of his essence.¹⁰ By reason of the revelations he received, Moses was therefore 'most fully instructed in the knowledge of God'.¹¹

When God spoke with Moses, he meant to speak through him to the People of Israel. It was in fact through his Prophet that God led his People, instructed it, and handed down the Law to it. As far as the instruction of the people goes, 'the Old Law, says St. Thomas, which contained temporal promises, proposed little that surpassed the understanding of man's reason'.¹² In other words, although the divine essence and simplicity, and the name of God had been revealed to Moses,¹³ few strictly supernatural mysteries were handed down by the latter in the Law.

On comparing together the revelations made to the Patriarchs and to Moses respectively, they are seen to differ mainly in two respects. In the former the scope of the divine message is restricted to a few families, and particular emphasis is made on the oneness of God; in the latter the scope is extended to envisage a whole people, while more stress is laid on the divine simplicity.

Under the Law itself many other revelations were made, but that made to Moses was the noblest of all. It was only he who beheld the divine essence; what was handed down to him was presupposed in later divine disclosures; and the prophets themselves, while receiving independent revelations, often appealed to the Law of Moses.¹⁴

After the time of Moses God raised many a prophet in Israel to serve as his mouthpiece to his people. But St. Thomas remarks that prophetic revelation was rare before the time of Samuel,¹⁵ for we read in 1 Kgs 3, 1 that 'the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no manifest vision'. The Holy Doctor also quotes a passage from St. Augus-

¹⁰ C.G., I, 22; I, q. 12, a. 11 ad 2; II-II, q. 174, a. 5 ad 1; In 2 Cor., c. 12, lect. 1. St. Thomas owes this doctrine to St. Augustine who, in *De Gen. ad litt.*, bk. 12 (chh. 26, 27, 28, 34: PL 34, 476 ff) and in Epistle 147 *De videndo Deo* (ch. 13; PL 34, 610) strongly presses this point.

¹¹ *De Ver.*, q. 12, a. 14 ad 1.

¹² C.G., I, 5.

¹³ II-II, q. 174, a. 6c.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; Cf. *De Ver.*, q. 12, a. 14c.

¹⁵ Cf. II-II, q. 174, a. 6 arg. 2, and ad 2.

tine to explain why the prophets flourished most under the monarchy.¹⁶ The Hipponese Doctor explains that as in the beginning of the Assyrian kingdom God had made promises to Abraham, so also at the time of the foundation of Rome, under whose rule those promises were to be fulfilled, God inspired prophets who, by spoken and by written word, would bear testimony to them. The Angelic Doctor further adds that at the time of the monarchy the Chosen People was free from foreign rule. Since it enjoyed liberty, and was therefore fully responsible for its deeds, that time was particularly apt for it to receive instructions from the prophets on things to do.¹⁷ Since the establishment of the monarchy, prophets almost never failed to appear inside Israel; but the scope of their activity was limited to their own people. When their utterings began to acquire importance also for the Gentiles, they began to put them down in writing.¹⁸

The time of grace. The revelations considered up to now, St. Thomas says, were ordained to that in which God spoke to us in his own Son made Man.¹⁹ Christ, the Incarnate Word, was 'full of grace and truth' (Jn. 1, 14). The time of his coming is consequently called 'the fulness of time', 'the time of grace'. In him God spoke to us in a fuller and more perfect way than he had done in the Old Testament.²⁰ In fact Christ revealed divine mysteries to us clearly and without figures; indeed he showed forth the meaning of old figures by his actual fulfillment of them. Further, Christ proclaimed to us the mystery of the blessed Trinity.²¹ During his public ministry revealed truth was fully proposed,

¹⁶ ST AUGUSTINE, *De Civ. Dei*, bk. 18, c. 27: PL41, 584.

¹⁷ 'Tunc populus non opprimebatur ab alienigenis, sed proprium regem habebat: et ideo oportebat per prophetas eum instrui de agendis, quasi libertatem haberent'. II-II, q. 174, a. 6, ad 2.

¹⁸ This meaning seems to be implied in the passage from St. Augustine quoted in II-II, q. 174, a. 6. Commenting this text, and asking himself why prophecy began to be written at the time of Isaias, CAJETAN writes: 'Quia scilicet tunc erat exordium Romanae urbis, qua imperante erat Christus venturus, et impleturus omnium prophetarum oracula, ac extensurus promissam salutem universo orbi. Decuit siquidem simul incipere scripturam et cui scriberetur. Populus Israel non egebat scriptura, habens coram Prophetas; Gentiles sub Romana Ecclesia egebant Scriptura. Et ideo simul Scriptura prophetica et Roma coeperunt. Hanc rationem non ausus essem dicere, nisi auctoritas Augustini in 18 de Civ. Dei, allata in littera, me foveret'.

¹⁹ In Heb., c. 1 lect. 1.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ II-II, q. 174, a. 6c.

and the Apostles whom he instructed announced his message not only to the Chosen People which had long awaited his coming, but also to other peoples and to the world at large.

Revelation, says the Holy Doctor, did not end with the ministry of Christ.²² In fact St. John wrote the book of the Apocalypse, which contains new revelations; in the Acts of the Apostles we read that Agabus and the daughters of Philip prophesied; from a few suggestions in St. Paul it would seem that the gift of prophecy was sufficiently common among the early Christians. In general we may say that revelation still continues inside the Church, not to increase the body of canonical revelations, but to instruct private individuals on their actions.²³

II. THE DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT OF REVELATION

From the schematic and necessarily incomplete survey of the history of revelation as we could reconstruct it from a few references in St. Thomas, the otherwise obvious fact of the historic progress of revelation is brought home again, this time to bear on the more important issue of the evolution of the doctrinal content that may have accompanied the historic development. There is no doubt that, as further revelations were made by God, men learned more and more about the godhead and salvation. At the close of canonical revelation there emerged a much clearer picture of the mysteries of the faith as a whole. The age of Christ is described as the time of grace and the fulness of time, not only because in it grace was more abundantly poured on men, but also because then too divine mysteries were proposed more fully than ever before. For this reason revelation can be considered as culminating in a supreme moment of uppermost perfection, in which all divine truths pertaining to salvation were openly preached to all. The question we are now to discuss is how, according to St. Thomas, are we to conceive the progress of the doctrinal content of revelation. Are we to say that those distant, sometimes widely separated revelations, were mere vehicles of disconnected messages, adapted indeed to the needs of the time, but lacking in unity of content or organic development? Did successive revelations, especially those of the New Testament, bring about completely new doctrines? What did they add to the knowledge derived from the first revelation? Did they alter the substance of the faith, to which they were always

²² *Ibid.*, ad 3.

²³ Cf. I, q. 1, a. 8 ad 2; I-II, q. 112, a. 5c and ad 4; II-II, q. 174, a. 6 ad 3.

ordained? In other words: do we, the recipients of the New Testament revelation, believe something very different from that which the less fortunate Old Testament Israelites believed? What is the meaning of the fulness of revelation in New Testament times?

The answer to these questions may not be altogether clear after a superficial first reading of St. Thomas, for one reason, because at his time the question was not put precisely from the point of view of revelation, but rather from that of faith. There are passages in the writings of the Holy Doctor that may seem to imply real progress in the evolution of the doctrinal content of successive revelations, while others seem to deny such progress, or at least notably to diminish it. It is the purpose of the present investigation to try to arrive at a clear picture of St. Thomas' doctrine on this important matter.

Indications of some progress.

The scheme of the three ages or periods of revelation which the Angelic Doctor proposes may suggest real progress in the subject-matter of revelation. The Holy Doctor in fact says that the faith in the deity increased according to these periods. The Patriarchs, he explains, '*fuerunt instructi in communi de omnipotentia unius Dei*'; but after them Moses '*plenius fuit instructus de simplicitate divinae essentiae*'; and at the final stage, '*tempore gratiae, ab ipso Filio Dei revelatum est mysterium Trinitatis*'.²⁴ This is in accordance with what St. Thomas says in another context, namely that in the Old Law few strictly supernatural mysteries were revealed,²⁵ which statement suggests that *more* were to come later. Besides, the Angelic Doctor often speaks of a veil of obscurity spread over Old Testament revelations, partially at least hiding their meaning. At no time on earth, he says, can man behold divine truth in itself, and so this had to be proposed to him under the veil of sensible figures; but in his less advanced state of divine knowledge, the veiled proposal of supernatural mysteries was more obscure. In the Old Law in fact neither was divine truth manifest in itself, nor the way leading to it was as yet made known.²⁶ On coming down from Mount Sinai Moses hid the brightness of his face by a veil, because, St. Thomas explains, '*nondum venerat tempus revelandi claritatem veritatis*'.²⁷ Elsewhere the Angelic

²⁴ II-II, q. 174, a. 6c.

²⁵ C.G., I, 5.

²⁶ I-II, q. 101, a. 3c.

²⁷ In 2 Cor., c. 3 lect. 3.

Doctor says that the Old Testament teachers of the faith received as much knowledge of it 'quantum oportebat pro tempore illo populo tradi vel nude vel in figura'.²⁸ To the prophets God revealed the plan of salvation only 'in generali'; still, later prophets 'cognoverunt quod priores non cognoverunt';²⁹ and St. Thomas repeatedly quotes St. Gregory the Great as saying that man's divine knowledge increased as time went on; wherefore towards the end of public revelation the Apostles knew some special things on God's salvific plan which the O.T. prophets had not known;³⁰ for the mystery of the redemptive Incarnation was fully disclosed only at the time of Christ. — When commenting Jn. 17, 6 St. Thomas distinguishes three kinds of knowledge of God. God, he says, can be known as the Creator, and as such he was known by the Gentiles. He can also be known as the only one to whom adoration is exclusively due, and in this manner he was known only by the Jews. But he can also be known as the Father of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, and as such, the Holy Doctor says, 'nulli erat notus, sed innotuit per Filium quando Apostoli crediderunt eum esse Filium Dei'.³¹

From these remarks, and from many others that could be quoted, one may perhaps be led to think that for the Angelic Doctor the historic progress of revelation was accompanied also by a substantial increase of the revealed doctrinal deposit, notably on the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation. At the same time, however, one can find in the Holy Doctor's writings numerous other indications that seem to suggest quite the opposite.

**Indications of
no progress.**

Before we call our attention to some of the last mentioned texts, it may not be inopportune to look briefly into what St. Thomas means by the term 'Majores' or Elders, in connection with whom he often speaks of supernatural mysteries in the Old Testament. By the 'Elders' St. Thomas seems to mean the great spiritual leaders of both the Old and New Testament. One can therefore well imagine him to refer by that somewhat vague and undetermined term to the Patriarchs, the Prophets and the Apostles. On one occasion at least he defines the Elders as those 'who have the office of instructing others in the faith'.³²

²⁸ II-II, q. 1, a. 8 ad 3.

²⁹ I, q. 58, a. 1 ad 3.

³⁰ Ibid.; Cf. II-II, q. 174, a. 6c; In Eph., c. 3 lect. 1.

³¹ In Jo., c. 17, lect. 2, n. 1.

³² Cf. III Sent., d. 25, q. 2, a. 1, Sol. 3; *ibid.* ad 3.

To the elders of the Old Testament St. Thomas sometimes ascribes the knowledge of, and the faith in, the highest mysteries ever revealed. Thus, for example, in connection with the mystery of the blessed Trinity he does not hesitate to affirm that '*ante peccatum et post, necessarium fuit a majoribus explicitam fidem de Trinitate haberi*'.³³ This statement seems to imply that, far from Christ being the first one to disclose it, the mystery of the Trinity was clearly known in the Old Testament by the Patriarchs and the Prophets; indeed even by Adam before his sin. This view of St. Thomas seems to be in conformity at least with what he, following St. Augustine, repeatedly and expressly attributes to Moses. Does not the Angelic Doctor in fact say that Moses was granted an intuitive vision of the divine essence? In that case he would undoubtedly learn this high mystery. The other prophets, one is led to think, may have learned it by less glamorous means, but not less surely, it would seem. This conclusion is confirmed by St. Thomas himself who, in very clear terms, speaks of the Trinity having been revealed to Abraham before the Law, and to Isaias under the Law.³⁴

Even on the mystery of the Incarnation, which is closely connected with that of the Trinity, one finds in the Holy Doctor's writings clear passages that seem to preclude development in the revealed data about it. From his Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard down to the Summa Theologiae St. Thomas maintains that faith in the mystery of the Incarnation was necessary both before and after man's fall from original justice. Thus he attributes to Adam himself the knowledge of this mystery, introducing only a slight distinction. He says that from the beginning Adam believed in God and in his Salvific Providence; he knew

³³ De Ver., q. 14, a. 11c; Cf. III Sent., d. 25, a. 2, q. 4, exp. text.; IV Sent., d. 6, q. 2, a. 2, Sol. 1; II-II, q. 2, a. 8.

³⁴ 'Fuerunt tamen factae visibiles apparitiones divinarum Personarum Patribus veteris Testamenti' I, q. 43, a. 7 ad 6. '(Deus dicitur videri) uno quidem modo per subiectam creaturam, visui corporali propositam, sicut creditur Abraham vidisse Deum, quando "tres vidit, et unum adoravit", Gen. 18; unum quidem adoravit, quia tres quos prius homines reputaverat, et postnodum angelos credidit, *recognovit mysterium Trinitatis*'. In Jo., c. 1 lect. 11 - '(Mysterium Trinitatis), quod revelatum est per seraphim dicentia: "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus", etc., ut habetur Is. 6, 3.' II-II, q. 171, a. 3c - 'Videns ergo Isaias gloriam Filii, vidit et gloriam Patris; immo totius Trinitatis, quae est unus Deus sedens super solium excelsum, cui Seraphim proclamant "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus". Non autem ita quod Isaias essentiam Trinitatis viderit, sed imaginaria visione, cum intelligentia, quaedam signa majestatis expressit'. In Jo., c. 12, lect. 7, n. 5. - For Abraham cf. also III Sent., d. 9, a. 2, Sol. 5, ad 3.

of the mystery of the Incarnation; but before his sin he knew it only in so far as it is ordained to the consummation of glory, and not in its redemptive function, or the atonement of his sin, which he did not foresee.³⁵ — Presumably speaking of the Prophets, the Holy Doctor writes: 'In secundo autem statu post peccatum ante adventum Christi quidam habebant *fidem explicitam de Redemptore*, quibus revelatio facta erat, qui majores dicebantur'.³⁶ The implication here is that also the redemptive function of the Incarnation was known before the time of Christ; and the Holy Doctor suggests that it was known with striking detail, 'non solum quantum ad incarnationem, sed etiam quantum ad *passionem* et resurrectionem, quibus humanum genus a peccato et morte liberatur'.³⁷

Thus in the writings of the Holy Doctor there seem to be two lines of thought that at first glance may seem to be overtly contradictory. For on the one hand he seems to conceive Old Testament revelations as progressively gathering momentum, until the full and perfect revelation is achieved during the ministry of Christ; on the other he admits the revelation of the greatest mysteries from the very start of human history, in a way as seemingly to leave Christ little scope for originality.

But did St. Thomas really contradict himself?

The Problem in the Middle Ages.

To answer this question we must look at the problem of the doctrinal evolution of revelation as it was felt at the time St. Thomas was writing. In the Middle Ages the problem was often formulated in terms such as these: Was the faith of those of old precisely the same as that of those who came later? Did the articles of the faith increase as time went on?

A long discussion on this matter during the Middle Ages seems to have been occasioned by a statement of St. Augustine who, writing to Optatus, affirms the unity of the faith in the Old and in the New Testaments.³⁸ Abelard may have been misled by reading into St. Augustine's text more than the author had meant, and for this reason he affirmed that all the articles of the faith had been revealed in the Old Testament, at least to

³⁵ III Sent., d. 25, q. 2, a. 2, Sol. 2; II-II, q. 2, a. 7c.

³⁶ III Sent., d. 25, q. 2, a. 2, Sol. 2.

³⁷ II-II, q. 2, a. 7c.

³⁸ 'Illa fides sana est qua credimus, nullum hominem... liberari a contagione mortis... nisi per unum mediatorem Dei et hominum Jesum Christum: cuius hominis eiusdemque Dei saluberrima fide etiam illi justi sunt salvi facti qui priusquam veniret in carnem, crediderunt in carnem venturum. Eadem enim fides est et illorum, et nostra.' S. AUG., Ep. 190, c. 2: PL 33, 858,

the Patriarchs and the Prophets. Many Scholastics would not go that far; but at the same time, the authority of St. Augustine ranked so high among them that they could not simply deny that the articles of the faith had somehow been revealed in the Old Testament too, for that would go counter to the unity of the faith under both Testaments affirmed by the Saint.³⁹ In his *Libri Sententiarum* Peter Lombard introduced a distinction that later came to be generally accepted. We find it also in St. Thomas.

The Problem in St. Thomas.

Commenting III Sent. dist. XXV, the Angelic Doctor had asked: 'Utrum per successionem temporum fides profecerit'. The same question crops up again in the *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 7, where he again enquires: 'Utrum articuli fidei secundum successionem temporum creverint'. Unfortunately these two articles of St. Thomas have been widely interpreted as dealing with the progress of dogma, and not with the development of revelation. But on looking deeply into the meaning of the Holy Doctor's words it clearly appears that this view is wrong. The Angelic Doctor's concern is, in fact, the development of the revealed deposit, or the successive revelation of the articles of the Symbol, and not our progressive understanding of the same.

The reply that St. Thomas gave in the Commentary on the Sentences pays closer attention to the subjective than to the objective element of the faith. His main concern is to establish whether faith progressed or not as time went on. Faith, he says, is knowledge. The 'quantity' of knowledge may be considered both on the part of the object, and on the part of the subject's act effectively tending to that object. Now, the efficacy of the act depends on the condition of the subject. Hence that act of the intellect under the influence of the will, which constitutes faith, can grow *subjectively* by reason of the act of either the intellect or the will. On the part of the will, the greater or lesser perfection of the act is proportionate to the will's promptitude to elicit its assent, for the firmness and the certainty of the assent depend on that promptitude. Now, the will's promptitude is something entirely personal, and as such it is independent of the stage revelation may have reached. The same thing applies also to the greatness of the faith deriving from devotion, or the accompanying state of charity in the subject. Therefore,

³⁹ Cf. R.M. SCHULTES, 'La dottrina di S. Tommaso d'Aquino sull'evoluzione della rivelazione e sull'evoluzione dei dommi' in *San Tommaso d'Aquino*, Pubblicazione commemorativa del sesto centenario della Canonizzazione, a cura della Facoltà di Filosofia dell'Università Cattolica, Milano, 1923, pp. 122-146.

on the part of the will, the subjective greatness of the faith is irrespective of whether the individual lived before or after Christ. If, on the other hand, we consider the greatness of the subjective faith from the point of view of the intellect, we must say that here the greatness of the faith depends on how much the truths believed are clearly seen and deeply penetrated. But this depends on the degree of objective clarity and fulness that revelation has reached at the time. Consequently, as far as the intellect is concerned, the believer's faith *per se* progressed with time. — Turning now from the subjective to the *objective* greatness of the faith, St. Thomas says that the object of the faith neither increased nor diminished with time, but remained always the same.

The latter point, which interests us most, is more fully developed in the *Summa*. Here the Angelic Doctor introduces a distinction in the object of the faith, saying that whilst there never was any increase in the *substance* of the faith, there was however progress in its *explicitation*. The principles of the faith are compared to the principles of reason: as first principles are to reason, so the articles of the Symbol are to faith. And as in reason self-evident principles are implicitly contained in the principle of contradiction, so also all the articles of the faith are implicitly contained in a few fundamental ones. The latter form the substance of the faith; all the rest only explain or render these explicit. When one believes these basic articles of the faith, as was always the case under both Testaments, one implicitly believes all the rest. Consequently, although in later times the substance of the faith was diversified in more numerous articles, and by that became more explicit, nevertheless it remained objectively unaltered in all times. This is how the Holy Doctor summarises this doctrine: 'Sic igitur, he says, dicendum est quod, quantum ad *substantiam* articulorum fidei, *non est factum* eorum augmentum per temporum successionem; quia quaecumque posteriores crediderunt continebantur in fide praecedentium Patrum, licet implicite. Sed quantum ad *explicitationem*, crevit numerus articulorum: quia quaedam explicitate cognita sunt a posterioribus quae a prioribus non cognoscebantur explicitate'.⁴⁰

The Contemporaries of Saint Thomas.

The same doctrine had already been taught by Hugh of St. Victor. 'We doubtlessly confess, he wrote, that those who preceded as well as those who followed (Christ) had the same faith, but not the same knowledge...

⁴⁰ II-II, q. 1, a. 7c.

In time, therefore, faith increased in all to become greater, but it was not so altered as to become another. Before the Law God was believed to be the Creator, and salvation and redemption was expected from him; but the faithful in general, excepting a few by reason of their office, did not know by whom and how that salvation was to be wrought and brought about. Under the Law the person of the Redeemer was foretold, and his coming was expected. But it had not yet been made manifest who that person was to be, whether a man, or an angel, or God. This was known only to those who were singularly illuminated by the Spirit for that purpose. In the time of grace, however, both the manner of redemption and the quality of the person of the Redeemer were openly preached to, and believed by, all'.⁴¹

Similar passages can be found in St. Bonaventure, whose doctrine on this point is identical with that of St. Thomas,⁴² as well as in St. Albert the Great, on whose teaching St. Thomas' own article in III Sent., dist. 25, q. 2 shows clear signs of dependence.⁴³

Doctrinal development of revelation.

From all that has been said up to now, what can we gather on St. Thomas' views on the doctrinal evolution of the revealed deposit? Does the Holy

Doctor simply say that all posterior revelation was no more than a process of explicitation of anterior revelations? In particular, how can this be reconciled with what he had said on the Trinity, namely that at all times the elders had explicit faith in the mystery?

St. Thomas reduces the substance of all revelations to two fundamen-

⁴¹ HUGH OF ST. VICTOR, *De Sacramentis*, l. 1, pars 10, c. 6 (sub fine): PL 176, 339.

⁴² 'Credibilia multiplicari dupliciter potest intelligi: vel quantum ad novorum articulorum additionem, vel quantum ad implicitorum explicationem. Si primo modo intelligatur, sic non est concedendum fidem profecisse quantum ad credendorum multitudinem; si secundo modo, sic profecit secundum processum temporis, quia quod uno tempore credebatur implicite et quasi uno articulo, processu temporis explicatum est et quasi distinctum in multa credibilia'. ST. BONAVENTURE, In III Sent., d. 25, a. 2, q. 1c: Ed. Quaracchi t. 3, p. 546.

⁴³ 'Fides duobus modis crescit ex parte credentis; in se autem nullo modo, sive quoad creditum. Ex parte credentis quoad intellectum et quoad affectum... (Quoad intellectum crescit) revelatione quidem, quia qui ampliores revelationes accipit, lucidius creditum videt, et melius percipit...' ST. ALBERT THE GREAT, In III Sent., d. 25, a. 1c. Ibid. ad. 2: 'Non creverunt articuli (fidei) in se, sed crevit articulorum explanatio et revelatio: et hoc non est articulorum crescere, nisi per accidens: licet enim passio forte tunc alicui determinate non innotuerit, tamen erat articulus, et credebatur implicite ab eis, quando aliquis quicumque modus liberationis ab eis futurus credebatur'.

tal truths, namely God's existence and his salvific Providence.⁴⁴ From the point of view of doctrinal evolution we think that he sufficiently suggests that a distinction must be made between these two basic truths: one thing is the revelation of the mystery of God, and quite another the disclosure of the mystery of salvation. Besides, considering those to whom a divine communication is made, the Holy Doctor makes a clear-cut distinction between immediate and mediate recipients, namely the 'Majores' and the 'Minores' respectively. Further he takes cognizance of the other important fact, that the doctrinal content of a particular revelation can be proposed either clearly or obscurely. With these distinctions in mind, we can better understand the position of St. Thomas.

**Mystery of
the Trinity.**

On the mystery of God as known to man by revelation, we believe the Angelic Doctor admits no objective increase in the doctrinal deposit from Adam to Christ, but only an increase in the diffusion of the mystery.

As it will be recalled from texts already quoted, according to the Holy Doctor the mystery of the Blessed Trinity was always known not only to Adam, but also to the great spiritual leaders of Israel, like Abraham, Moses, Isaias, and others. It was always explicitly believed by them. But it is important to note that, before the coming of Christ, it was *explicitly* believed *only* by them. 'Dicendum est, says St. Thomas, quod de Deo potest multipliciter haberi notitia. Uno modo per Christum, in quantum scilicet est Pater Unigeniti et consubstantialis, et alia quae *specialiter* Christus de Deo Patre et Filio et Spiritu Sancto *docuit* quantum ad *unitatem essentiae* et *trinitatem personarum*: et hoc tantum est creditum, *nec in veteri testamento fuit explicite creditum nisi a majoribus tantum*'.⁴⁵ In other words, according to St. Thomas, the Elders before Christ knew the mystery of the Trinity as fully and as clearly as we do; but they did not preach it to the rest, because, as the Holy Doctor says, 'it was necessary for the human mind to get used to the things of the faith little by little'.⁴⁶ To the ordinary people the mystery was hinted at in a veiled and obscure manner.⁴⁷ Consequently their 'faith in the Trinity was hidden in that of the Elders'.⁴⁸ When Christ came on earth, he did

⁴⁴ II-II, q. 1, a. 7c.

⁴⁵ In Heb., c. 11, lect. 2; Cf. III Sent., d. 25, q. 2, a. 2, Sol. 4.

⁴⁶ III Sent., d. 25, q. 2, a. 2. Sol. 1 ad 2.

⁴⁷ 'Non fuit positum mysterium Trinitatis manifeste in veteri Testamento, sed velate, ut sapientes capere possent'. III Sent., d. 25, q. 2; a. 2, Sol. 4 ad 3.

⁴⁸ II-II, q. 2, a. 8, ad 2.

not improve on the objective knowledge of God that Old Testament leaders had, but only extended it to the ordinary faithful. In fact by means of his Apostles Christ preached the faith in the Trinity to all mankind.⁴⁹ Hence, according to the Holy Doctor, we must say that successive revelations on God, culminating in that made by Christ, did not further enrich the revealed doctrinal deposit, objectively and intrinsically considered. In the fulness of time the contents of the first revelation of God, hitherto known only, though entirely, to a few, were openly proclaimed to all.

This does not mean that thereby no development was made; it means that the progress was limited to the *subjective* knowledge of the *ordinary faithful*. The average Israelite, as opposed to the Elders, had hitherto believed explicitly only in one God, the God of his Fathers, who had shown special kindness to his people, with which he often spoke in times past, and which he ruled and protected by a special Providence. By such faith the ordinary faithful up to Christ implicitly believed all that their more instructed Elders knew or believed on God. Then, when Christ preached and taught in the streets and synagogues of Palestine, he illuminated by his doctrine the minds of his simple listeners, and clarified for them the crude concept of God which they hitherto had had. In the light of his teaching these simple people, as far as their information on God goes, were placed on a par with their greatest leaders of old. Hence, while Christ taught them nothing on God that their Elders did not know, he disclosed to them something which they still ignored.

Notwithstanding this, considering the complex of all divine self-disclosures as a whole, and taking into account, *not the subjective knowledge* therefrom deriving to the less instructed, but *the objective information* explicitly made available by God to *any man*, one must say, according to St. Thomas, that successive revelations did not intrinsically develop the objectively-revealed content of the mystery of God, but only gave the already acquired deposit more publicity; in this sense, that was later made explicit to all which long before had been explicit only to a few.

It is in this sense that statements by St. Thomas, seemingly implying an intrinsic doctrinal evolution of the mystery of God, are to be understood and interpreted. The Holy Doctor's casual remark that in the Old Testament there were 'few' strictly supernatural mysteries does not run

⁴⁹ 'Sed per Christum (fides Trinitatis) manifestata est mundo per apostolos'. II-II q. 2, a. 8 ad 2.

counter to our interpretation. It does not mean that the Trinity had not yet been revealed to anyone, but only that 'the Old Law... *proposed* few' such mysteries to the people at large. If Moses veiled his face on coming down from Mount Sinai, the reason was not that he did not know God's mystery 'most fully', but that the time had not yet come for its open proclamation *to the people*. Similarly the Holy Doctor's assertion that Moses was 'more fully' instructed than the Patriarchs on God's simplicity is naturally explained by the fact that only he beheld the divine essence face to face. In that context St. Thomas primarily intends to bring out the peculiar stress made in the revelations to the Patriarchs and to Moses respectively, namely on the oneness and omnipotence of God in the first case, and on the divine simplicity in the second. The rather vague terms used in connection with the divine knowledge of the Patriarchs in II-II, q. 171, a. 6c. must be interpreted in the light of the Holy Doctor's more explicit statements referred to above. When this is done, all apparent inconsistency disappears. It is therefore safe to say that, according to St. Thomas, Adam, Abraham, Moses, Isaias, and most probably many others, knew and explicitly believed the mystery of the Trinity, in such a way that Christ's doctrine on the subject was not original in the sense that it was disclosed by him for the first time, but only in the sense that it was preached by him openly to all.

Incarnation and Redemption

The process of the revelation of God's salvific plan is considered by the Holy Doctor to have been different from that of the Trinity. The latter, though not universally proclaimed, was nevertheless clearly revealed from the beginning; the former was revealed in the beginning only obscurely; it was rendered progressively clearer as time went on, and was made fully manifest and universally known only at the time of its fulfilment. Here indeed what had previously been implicit, at a later stage was made explicit, more or less to one and all. Wherefore successive revelations brought to light new traits of that mystery, and while these traits were in linear continuation with the central idea originally disclosed, they nevertheless considerably clarified and enriched it.

This conception, solidly founded on the data of Holy Scripture, is at the same time in sharp contrast with what has been said above of the doctrinal development of the mystery of the Trinity; and the contrast is vividly brought out by the Holy Doctor himself. In fact when, following St. Gregory the Great, the Angelic Doctor teaches that later revelations

clarified earlier ones, he affirms this exclusively of the mystery of salvation during the Old Testament, and, as it were, in opposition to that of the Trinity. In a text repeatedly referred to by St. Thomas, Gregory had said: 'Per incrementum temporum crevit scientia spiritualium Patrum. Plus namque Moyses quam Abraham, plus Prophetæ quam Moyses, plus Apostoli quam Prophetæ in omnipotentis Dei scientia eruditi sunt'.⁵⁰ Of this St. Thomas wrote: 'Dictum Gregorii est intelligendum de tempore ante Christi incarnationem, quantum ad cognitionem *huius mysterii*'.⁵¹ And, still more clearly, perhaps: 'Verbum Gregorii est intelligendum de his quæ pertinent ad mysterium Incarnationis, de quibus aliqui posteriores *expressiores* revelationes acceperunt quam Moyses; *non autem quantum ad cognitionem Divinitatis*, de qua *plenissime* Moyses fuit instructus'.⁵² In fact, comparing Moses with a later prophet, David, the Angelic Doctor thinks that 'Moses' vision excelled more in the knowledge of the godhead; but David knew and expressed more fully the mystery of Christ's Incarnation'.⁵³

It is to be noted that for St. Thomas the 'more express' revelations on Christ concern the *same* mystery. The original revelation of God's salvific Providence was vague and undetermined. It became more and more determined as further details were disclosed. But these details, whilst tracing out a progressively clearer picture of God's plan, did not alter its substance. God's salvific Providence, revealed and believed from the very start, included in fact 'omnia quæ temporaliter a Deo dispensantur ad hominum salutem', because, as St. Thomas further explains, 'in fide redemptionis humanæ implicite continetur et incarnatio Christi, et ejus passio, et omnia huiusmodi'.⁵⁴ And this explains why the substance of the faith in salvation remained unaltered in all times.

Furthermore, one notes that, according to St. Thomas, in the knowledge of the mystery of salvation there was not as great a difference between the 'Majores' and the 'Minores' of the Old Testament as there was in their respective knowledge of God. The mystery of salvation was objectively obscure even to the Elders, and it was the less clear, the farther they were from its actual fulfilment. Its revelation 'was not yet complete'

⁵⁰ ST. GREGORY THE GREAT, *In Ezech.* hom 16, c. 12: PL 76, 980. St. Thomas refers to this passage many times, quoting it only ad sensum.

⁵¹ II-II, q. 174, a. 6 ad 1.

⁵² De Ver., q. 12, a. 14 ad 1.

⁵³ II-II, q. 174, a. 4 ad 1.

⁵⁴ II-II, q. 1, a. 7c.

in the Old Testament; and consequently the process of clarification continued even with regards to the Elders.⁵⁵ As time went on, however, the prophets learned a good deal on what was to be accomplished in Christ, notably on the Incarnation, the passion and resurrection.⁵⁶ But the information they received was gradual and never entirely full. In fact the Old Testament is compared by St. Paul to the state of childhood,⁵⁷ for 'as much knowledge of the faith was given to the Fathers, who were instructors in the faith, as was necessary to give to the people at that time, either openly or in figures'.⁵⁸

Another limitation of the revealed knowledge passed on to the faithful in general is suggested by the last remark, namely that in the Old Testament divine truth was proposed to them either openly or in figures. St. Thomas says that the ordinary faithful were then taught clearly that God is one, and that he is the Creator of everything; but the Incarnation and the atonement were at once hinted at and hidden from them under the veil of figures.⁵⁹ Both before and after the Law Christ's passion was signified and pre-figured by the sacrifices. The Elders, says St. Thomas, knew what these meant, even explicitly. But the rest had only a veiled knowledge.⁶⁰ Finally, as the time of Christ approached, the mystery of redemption was more clearly understood,⁶¹ until full clarity was attained in New Testament times. The mystery of Christ, St. Paul writes, 'in other generations was not known to the sons of men, as it is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit' (Eph. 3, 5). For, as St. Thomas points out, 'those who were nearer to Christ, either before him, like John the Baptist, or after him, like the Apostles, knew the mysteries of the faith more fully'.⁶² Thus successive revelations rendered explicit what had originally been implicit in the mystery of salvation. The last clarification was made by Christ himself who, by his passion, death and resurrection fulfilled what the prophets had seen less clearly and from a distance.

Conclusion. To conclude, therefore, we may say that St. Thomas considers the nucleus of the revealed deposit to consist

⁵⁵ III Sent., d. 25, q. 2, a. 2 Sol. 1.

⁵⁶ II-II, q. 2, a. 7c.

⁵⁷ Gal. 3, 24ff; 4 - Cf. II-II, q. 1, a. 7 ad 2.

⁵⁸ II-II, q. 1, a. 7 ad 3.

⁵⁹ Cf. In Heb., c. 11 lect. 2.

⁶⁰ II-II, q. 2, a. 7c; III Sent., d. 25, q. 2, a. 2 Sol. 2.

⁶¹ II-II, q. 1, a. 7c; q. 2, a. 7c.

⁶² II-II, q. 1, a. 7 ad 4.

in the two basic truths of the Trinity and the Redemptive Incarnation. In the history of revelation a development was made with regards to both, but in a different way. At the final stage of canonical revelation, Christ's teaching on God did not further elaborate the intrinsic doctrinal contents of the mystery of the Trinity so as to render them more explicit than they had been to the Fathers of old, but only extrinsically contributed to their widespread promulgation. By contrast with this, on the mystery of salvation Christ brought about an intrinsic doctrinal development, both by his teaching and by the events of his life. By the latter especially, he filled in the last details in the revelation of God's salvific plan, rendering fully explicit what had remained more or less implicit until its actual fulfilment in himself.

Alongside these supernatural mysteries proposed to our faith, revelation often included also instructions pertaining to moral behaviour. Of these the Angelic Doctor says that revelation did not develop in a linear way, but adapted itself to the conditions of particular times, and had for its directive principle that which was expedient to the salvation of the elect.⁶³

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⁶³ II-II, q. 174, a. 6c.