

January 15, 2006

The Second Sunday after Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Inasmuch as the Books of Chronicles appear in the Bible as "historical books," it will be instructive, I believe, to say something about the relationship between history and Holy Scripture.

First, the Bible not only records history; it also creates history. By this I mean that the Bible, as written down, read and proclaimed in the ongoing community of faith (the Church of both Testaments), influences and directs the course of history. We ourselves are part of the history created by Holy Scripture. We are the *qahal*, the *ecclesia*, the gathering of those who in the Holy Spirit are assembled to attend to God's Word. In the history that it records, the Bible itself prolongs that history in those who receive it in faith.

Second, this unified history, comprised of what the Bible records and what the Bible creates, is a single, living, ongoing reality, in which there is a continuity between the words of Holy Scripture and the Church's understanding of those words. If there were to be a break between the Bible and its interpretation, that continuity would be lost. There would be a disruption in Salvation History. This is the tragedy known as "heresy."

Third, the correct understanding of Holy Scripture includes what some of the Church Fathers (for instance, Didymus the Blind, *Job* 9.13; Isidore of Pelusium, *Letters* 4.203) called *theoria*, meaning the spiritual discernment of the inner meaning of the Bible through the lens of Christ.

This inner sense of Scripture is not abstract; it pertains to one's personal life in Christ. That is to say, true *theoria* involves understanding the Bible in such a way as to cast light on the actual living of the Christian life. The Bible becomes the mirror in which we see our true faces (James 1:23). It is not only an understanding of the Bible, but also an understanding of ourselves in relation to God. It entails the reading of the Bible as a path of self-knowledge and growth in the Holy Spirit.

Theoria includes the perception of historical analogies between our own lives and the history recorded in God's Word. What in the Bible is called *theoria* is in our souls called the image of God. Through the contemplation of these analogies, we understand our own life and grasp both what God is doing in those lives and also what we ourselves are supposed to do. This is a Spirit-given insight into the Word of God, permitting that Word to take the measure of our own existence.

Within the Rule of Faith handed down by the Church, these spiritual insights into Holy Scripture are potentially infinite--*sed theoriae quasi infinitae*, as St. Bonaventure expressed it (*In Hexaemeron* 15.10). In these perceptions the past of the Bible is rendered effective in the life of the Christian, because both are parts of a single history.

Through these *theoriae* the Holy Scriptures provide the pattern for understanding all of history. There can be no "theology of history" except through the full, experienced understanding of the Bible.

This spiritual exegesis of the Sacred Scriptures, however, always takes place in history and pertains to the movement of history. The Bible is not a reservoir of truths that can be removed from an historical shape. Understanding of the Bible must not become something abstracted from the historical movement of the Bible itself. Its continuous line, which records history, is recorded within history, and gives form and shape to future history.

What, then, should be said about dogmatic pronouncements by which the Church seems to "fix" doctrine, to remove biblical teaching from its historical context? The correct answer to this question, I believe, must involve two considerations.

First, such dogmatic pronouncements, far from being an abstraction from history, also take place within history. Therefore, they "fix" doctrine only in the sense that divine revelation itself "fixes" doctrine. That is, they testify to the fullness of wisdom and knowledge that abide in the Word incarnate (Colossians 1:19; 2:3,9).

Second, such dogmatic pronouncements, even when they are formulated in a positive way (such as the *homoousios* of Nicaea), tend essentially to serve a negative purpose. The dogmatic formulations of the Church are radically apophatic. They are "definitions" in the sense of setting limits (*fines*), lines to exclude heresy. They do not "clarify"

divine revelation by adding extra light, as it were, to what is already the fullness of light.

Finally, there can be no real understanding of the Bible in the present without an understanding of the Bible in the past, both the past as recorded in the Bible itself and the past in the sense of the Church's own historical understanding of the Sacred Text. The attempt to come to Holy Scripture outside of that long historical context is not only presumptuous; it also separates the reader from the Bible's own history. Again in the words of St. Bonaventure, "the knowledge of future things depends on the knowledge of past things" (*In Hexaemeron* 2.17). This can be hard work, but in the study of the Bible there is no substitute for the knowledge of history.

Accordingly, in the present commentary on the Books of Chronicles, this interpreter's first and dominating intention will be to place the Sacred Text in its historical setting, pointing out from time to time as opportunity allows, how the Church has understood the message of these books.

History and Worship

We reflected earlier on Ben Sirach's list of "famous men" that forms a continuous narrative by a series of very short biographies. Similar to that list is the roll call of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. Like the list in Ben Sirach, this one too includes Enoch, Noah, and Abraham near the beginning. More pertinent to our reflections here, however, is the place where the narrative ends-in a scene of liturgical worship. The author ends his narrative by referring to this "so great a cloud of witnesses" (12:1), which appear shortly afterwards in his description of orthodox Christian worship:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel (12:22-24).

In this memorable text the history of the Chosen People comes to its fulfillment when in one assembly is gathered together the entire "cloud of witnesses," those "spirits of just men made perfect," along with

Christians themselves, these later pilgrims who have "come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God." Once again, biblical history arrives at its culmination in God's people assembled to worship Him.

When the saints on earth worship the Lord, this worship joins them to the worship in heaven. The prayers offered by the Church on earth are mingled with the worship in heaven: "Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand" (Revelation 8:3-4).

But what happens then upon the earth? These prayers jointly offered by the saints in heaven and on earth affect the course of history. Things happen in history: "Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it to the earth. And there were noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake" (8:5), and the following chapters of Revelation go on to describe the historical results of this prayer.

The Church's worship, then, is at the center of the Church's place in history. It is through her orthodox glorification of the biblical God, the Father of her Lord Jesus Christ, that the Church chiefly fulfills the historical role to which that God has summoned her.

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