

August 21, 2016

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings Language and History

To speak of history, it is necessary to speak of language. None of the properly human activity— thought, reflection, consciousness, choice—is possible without language, and language, in its turn, is inherited. It is derived from History. It is through language that Cosmology and History converge in human consciousness.

There is an obvious corollary to this observation: History, as an object of man's knowledge, must actually *precede* Cosmology; man cannot *think* about the world until he has, at least for a while, *lived* in it. Israel certainly regarded reality in the sequence from-History-to-Cosmology. In the New Testament, likewise, the thinking of the Church worked—backwards, as it were—from the historical experience of the Man Jesus to the contemplation of the eternally begotten Word, in whom “all things came to be (*panta egeneto*).”

The importance of these considerations is apparent if we bear in mind that a major underlying assumption of Christian Theology is—and here we come to the nub—the historical nature of Revelation and Redemption. Indeed, this assumption has the quality of a principle.

In the biblical faith man neither seeks nor receives “deliverance” (redemption, salvation, deification, reconciliation—pick your favorite) by escaping from history and time. The biblical believer will insist, on the contrary, that “deliverance” comes only in and through a historical process; indeed, it is found only within a *specific line* of history: The History of Salvation.

Part of the mysterious quality of the events of salvation derives from the “two freedoms” implied in their historicity. By this comment I mean to suggest the encounter of two mysteries:

First, if the freedom of man is inherently mysterious (indeed, aporetic), what shall we say of the freedom of God?

Second, who can say what *happens* when divine and human freedom intersect in an individual moment of time? Since we predicate freedom in God by way of analogy with human freedom—and human freedom itself is beyond

understanding—how can we even begin to grasp how divine and human freedom are related in the great drama of Salvation History?

The biblical writers themselves do not even try. They simply tell the pertinent stories of Rebecca and Abraham's servant (Genesis 24), Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37-45), Ruth and Boaz, Jonathan and his armor-bearer (1 Samuel 14), Esther and Mordecai, Paul and his nephew (Acts 23), and so forth—without attempting to examine the “mechanics” or “meshing” of divine and human freedom. The biblical authors seem simply to accept that the *synergism* of Salvation History—the workings and interplay of God's will and man's—lies outside of human reckoning. God is not only wiser than man; His wisdom is of a different order.

As though these ideas were not sufficiently puzzling, a third dilemma emerges: God's providential use of man's evil will (sin, infidelity, apostasy) in the fulfilling of His own salvific purposes. *Synergism*—two wills fused without confusion—must find some place for God's ability to bring good out of evil, to employ “vessels of destruction,” as well as “vessels of election,” in Salvation History.