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Symbol and Revelation, by Avery Dulles S.J. Fellow WWICS
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Scholars

In reading Fr. Dulles' paper I was very much impressed by the clarity and orderliness of his presentation, the wealth and variety of the authors on whom he commented, and the judiciousness of his own remarks and contentions.

To a great extent I would attribute his success in these respects to his choice of a typological approach. For by collecting a notable number of writers and by grouping them in accord with the chief emphasis in their notion of divine revelation, he secured as it were by a single stroke both a broad basis for his paper, a clear account of differences of opinion, and a cumulative argument for the position he himself favored.

The argument took its stand on contemporary theological thought in which were distinguished five different accounts of the nature of revelation, namely, the propositional, the historical, the mystical, the dialectical, and the symbolic. The argument developed by pointing out the insufficiencies of the first four and expounding cogently the strength of the fifth. It concluded by integrating with the fifth all that the first four offered when stripped of their simplifications and accepted as needed or helpful complements to the fifth

My agreement with Fr. Dulles' position is profound, and I can express this all the more convincingly by reverting to my own contention in a paper read last June at the convention

of the Catholic Theological Society of America.¹ There occurs in the gospel according to John a peculiar use of the verb, to draw, helkein. On the eve of his passion Jesus, after explaining that a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest (Jn 12: 24), went on to add: "... Now is the hour of judgment for this world; now shall the prince of this world be driven out. And I shall draw all men to myself, when I am lifted up from the earth" (Jn 12:31 f.). That lifting was the crucifixion according to the evangelist who immediately added: "This he said to indicate the kind of death he was to die" (Jn 12:33).

It is not difficult to discern the power of a symbol in the power of the crucified to draw all men to himself and, once that is granted, to acknowledge that the power of the symbol itself is conditioned by a prior drawing by the Father. "No man can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me" (Jn 6:44). And this prior drawing is a listening and learning: "Everyone who has listened to the Father and learned from him, comes to me" (Jn 6:45).

To the outward symbol there has to be added an inner grace, and when the addition occurs, there arises a distinction between mere information and revelation. So it was at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus responded to Peter's confession with the words: "Simon, son of Jonah, you are favored indeed: you did not learn that from mortal man; it was revealed to you by my heavenly Father" (Mt 16:17). Finally, the episode closed with

the charge of Jesus to the disciples "... to tell no one that he is the Christ" (Mt 16:20). Merely to repeat what Peter had acknowledged would of itself have been no more than information. It would communicate revelation only to those that had listened to the Father and had learned from him.

If the foregoing does not possess the generality of Fr. Dulles' paper, at least it correlates symbol and revelation in an eminent instance and it leads to the addition of linguistic usage, of historical occurrence, of a mystical dimension, of a dialectical character.

To begin from the last of these, there is the recurrent NT contrast of light and darkness, life and death, love and hatred. They are especially prominent in the writings attributed to St. Paul and St. John. Let me quote but a single passage from St. John for it has the advantage of going back to Isaiah and recalling St. Paul's use of Isaiah reported in the Acts of the Apostles (Act 28:26 f.). It puts the dialectical issue in all its ultimacy.

In spite of the many signs which Jesus had in their presence, they would not believe in him, for the prophet Isaiah's utterance had to be fulfilled:

'Lord, who has believed what we have reported, and to whom has the Lord's power been revealed?' So it was that they could not believe, for there is another saying of Isaiah's: 'He has blinded their eyes and dulled their minds, lest they should see with their eyes, and perceive with their minds, and turn to me to heal them.' Isaiah said this because he saw his

glory and spoke about him. (Jn 12:37-41).

Scripture, then, is unequivocal in its acknowledgment of evil, sin, wickedness.

But it is even stronger in its affirmation of light, life, love. God, ho theos, and so I believe God the Father, is love (1 Jn 4:9. 16). He so loved the world as to send his only Son into the world to redeem it (Jn 3:16) by being lifted up as the serpent was lifted up by Moses in the wilderness, so that everyone who has faith in him may in him possess eternal life (Jn 3:14 f.). So it is that we are to "exult in the hope of the divine splendor that is to be ours. More than this: let us even exult in our sufferings, because we know that suffering trains us to endure, and endurance brings proof that we have stood the test, and this proof is the ground of hope. Such a hope is no mockery, for God's love has flooded our inmost heart through the Holy Spirit he has given us" (Rom 5:2-5).

That gift of the Spirit, of God's love, completes and may even sublate our own inner light. Native to mankind is the light of attending, of endeavoring to understand, of judging critically one's own insights, of deliberating not about personal or group advantage and disadvantage but about what really is worth while. The gift of God's love frees that inner light, lets further questions be raised, earlier insights be complemented, earlier judgments be corrected, earlier decisions and deeds be, as it were, undone by sincere repentance. Inasmuch as that process is under the impress of God's love, it is, I suspect, something like the listening to the Father and learning from him to which the

gospel of John refers (Jn 6:45). Again, it seems to be the discernment of spirits referred to by Christian ascetical writers down the centuries.² Finally, it is a process that can be sublated by what William Johnston regards as the central element in mystical experience when, purged of evil ways and illumined by sustained self-scrutiny, one may find oneself beyond questioning and thinking in what an anonymous medieval English mystic named a Cloud of Unknowing.³

Dialectical in its human setting, moving towards mysticism in its inward unfolding, revelation also has dimensions that are historical and linguistic. Its incarnate symbol is the one death of Christ, but its message and effect are for all men. So from one place to all places, from one time to all times, there is spread the word of the Father who has revealed his love through the sending of his Son and ever transforms that word from a mere piece of information into a revelation through the Holy Spirit who floods the hearts of listeners with God's own love.⁴

Notes

¹Entitled "Theology and Praxis" the paper will appear in the 1977 issue of the Proceedings of the Society. To it I must refer the reader who wishes to know how extensive is my debt in what follows to Eric Voegelin's "The Gospel and Culture" in Jesus and Man's Hope edited by D.G. Miller and D.Y. Hadidian, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971.

²For a brief account, Sacramentum mundi, II, 89-91. For fuller treatment, Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, articles on "Consolation spirituelle" (II, 1617-34), "Demon" (III, 141-238), "Direction spirituelle" (III, 1002-1211), "Discernement des esprits" (III, 1222-91). On the key discriminant in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, a notable study recommended with a preface by Karl Rahner is: Harvey D. Egan, The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian Mystical Horizon, St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1976.

³A book that includes this theme is expected from Fr. Johnston to be published shortly by Harper & Row.

⁴Cor ad cor loquitur. As love speaks to love, so too it listens to love and learns from love. It is not, of course, a sole criterion. All the questions that arise from attention, from the effort to understand, from the demands for factual evidence, from judgments of value, also are relevant. But Pascal's claim that the heart has reasons which reason does not know becomes valid when it is recognized that it is within the perspective of loving that the other criteria attain their due place and pull their proper weight. Nor is this

perspective of loving arbitrary. For "... the harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law dealing with such things as these. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the lower nature with its passions and desires. If the Spirit is the source of our life, let the Spirit also direct our course" (Gal 5:22-25).