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Revelation and Inspiration in Contemporary Roman Catholic Theology

EUGENE F. KLUG

THE LITURGICAL movement within the Roman Catholic Church has evidenced among other things a renewed interest in the Bible and Biblical studies. Even such terms as the Reformation principle, "sola Scriptura," have come in for special study, and Roman Catholic theologians have daringly attempted to show how such a principle is perfectly acceptable, if understood in terms of their definition of Scripture. Since that which is authoritative in Roman theology must always in every case also conform to the *regula fidei*, or dogma of the church, it seems inevitable that the Church of Rome must continue to maintain within itself the final source of theology, outside and beyond the text of Holy Scripture itself.

However, as little as modern Protestantism could conceive of having Christian theology without the Bible—and thus was led back by the neo-orthodox movement and Karl Barth to the Bible—so little could the Church of Rome continue to remain aloof to and uninfluenced by the great things that were going on in the area of Biblical studies, whether of liberal or conservative bent. The question is: Have these studies, in which Roman Catholic scholars engage, altered in any way the views of the church on tradition and the Scriptures, especially the relationship of the two? At the Council of Trent, in Session IV, the warning had been spelled out that the Scriptures must not be interpreted "contrary to that sense which Holy Mother Church—whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of Holy Scriptures—hath held and doth hold; or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers." Was it possible that the new Biblical movement might in some way modify the severity of this judgment over the Scriptures and place them into a more commanding position? And, granting the possibility that Rome was giving the Scriptures more attention, and in a very scholarly way, would it not be possible that the hoped-for dialogue between Protestants and Catholics would be more than just a futile academic exercise, and would actually portend the eventual reunion of these splintered factions of the Church?

Anyone concerned with the Biblical admonitions to unity cannot remain indifferent to the subject, also as it involves the Roman and Protestant communions of our day. However, the man would be a poor, not to say naive, observer of the theological scene today who would conclude that the renewed Biblical studies on all sides have effected a rapprochement unknown to any previous day. It would mean that Roman theologians have accepted new positions

on the place and meaning of *tradition* in their theology and on the significance of Holy Writ as the inspired Word of God.

Tradition, in Roman Catholic teaching, is a possession of the Church. It is based on the oral, apostolic tradition, and finds its continuance today, alive and active, in the living voice of the Church. According to Karl Adam, a highly regarded contemporary Roman Catholic theologian, the teaching authority of the Church is "guarded by the Holy Ghost" and is therefore the decisive *active* factor in dogmatic development."¹

"Tradition," the same writer explains, "is prior to and more fundamental than the Bible. It attests the Bible, both in its inspiration and in its canon. It is more comprehensive than the Bible, for it attests a mass of ritual and religious usage, of customs and rules, which is only slightly indicated in the Bible. And it possesses a quality which the Bible as a written document has not and cannot have, and which constitutes its pre-eminent merit, namely, that living spirit of revelation, that vitality of revealed thought, that 'instinct of faith' which stands behind every written and unwritten word, and which we call the 'mind of the church'."²

In Roman theology this view of the source of revelation is held to be consistent with teaching in the Church during the days of the early church fathers. Holy Scripture, self-authenticating by its very nature, forms the proper basis for all teaching in the Church, since it stems directly from Christ Himself. On this Roman theologians insist there has always been perfect agreement within the Church. However, no building is ever complete with a foundation only, runs the argument, and so the Church has been quite ready to add to the ever growing superstructure such "other scriptures" as "the Holy Councils of Nicea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, the works of Cyprian, Gregory Nazianzen, Basil, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Theophilus, Cyril, Hilary, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Prosper, Leo's Letter to Flavian, and the writings of all orthodox Fathers in communion with the Roman Church. . . ."³

In the late Middle Ages, however, began the contest which the Reformation was destined to bring into full play: Was Holy Writ or Holy Church primary? Henry of Ghent (d. 1293), a secular priest and independent thinker, but member of no definite school, held that the Church was first in leading a man to Christ, but "to confirm and substantiate . . . a faith already born, the authority of Holy Scripture, when it is understood, has the higher value."⁴

The obvious conclusion drawn from this line of thinking is also expressed by Henry: "And supposing the Church herself taught contrary to Scripture, he would not believe her."⁵ This was dangerously close to the position later proposed and defended by Luther.

The views proposed by Henry of Ghent continued to gain expression during the rest of the 13th and also the early 14th centuries. "Scripture" was not a broad and widely inclusive term but was restricted narrowly to the contents of the Biblical Canon itself and did not include the commentaries of the Church. John Wyclif

taught that the primitive Church was the Church, while the Church of his day was a church of simony and ignorance. On these grounds he held it to be inconceivable that that which was considered to be the Church should in any way be considered to be at one with the Scriptures. The natural implication of this teaching was that the Scriptures could exist and could continue as God's Word to build His Church, even when the Church as a visible organization had ceased to fulfill its function properly and thus lost its claim and right to the title of Church.

Such views were eventually judged, of course, to be heretical (and for his challenge of the primacy of the Church Wyclif was branded a heretic and posthumously burned). Tavard expresses the position of Roman Catholic theology today on the point of issue (which Wyclif raised): "Scripture cannot be the Catholic faith when it is cut off from the Catholic Church. Neither can be subservient to the other. They form a team. Once separated, each of them is maimed: the Church becomes a mere human organization; Scripture a mere book. The former falls into the hands of administrators; the latter into those of philologists."⁶

The 15th century, which saw the struggle of the Conciliarists and their ultimate defeat, ended with a sharp and clear affirmation of the primacy of the Pope and repudiation of the views which would have made Scripture the sole and last court of appeals in matters of theological controversy. The Roman Church today, however, recognizes that men like John Hus and Peter d'Ailly were at least right in protesting against "some Canon Law teachers, who receive their own decretals as though they were divine Scriptures."⁷

With Luther the split on the subject of the relationship of Scripture and tradition became permanent and irretrievable. It is typical in modern Roman Catholic theological circles to recognize, as Tavard does, that Luther was "the man of destiny" who "embodied the religious disquiet of his contemporaries."⁸ The same writer goes on to state: "Luther's was a tragic fate. A man of his time, his country, and his Order, he suffered like many others from a degenerate state of Church life in general and of theology in particular. If we may understand his case with sympathy, we cannot but regret the extent, hitherto unapproached, to which he unsettled the age-old assumptions on which the Fathers and the Medieval Doctors had been unanimous: Holy Writ is to be taken in its integrality and the Church is inseparable therefrom."⁹

Luther undoubtedly would find little to criticize in this evaluation of the part he played in the history of the Church—none grieved more deeply over the break-up of the visible Church—except for the final assumption that the Church as then constituted under the Roman papacy was the *sine qua non* for the Word itself, without which its validity could not exist. The issue really was—and this sore spot Luther was touching—that the Church's teaching on the doctrine of the Church was radically different from what Scripture had to say on the same subject.

The position which the Council of Trent finally came to solidify was the classical one, as it is termed by Catholic theologians. Scripture and tradition are not conceived, according to this view, as constituting for the Church a twofold source of revelation, but only one, since the two cannot be separated from each other. All revealed doctrine is contained in Scripture (in the broad meaning), and the faith of the Church, which embodies the apostolic tradition, is its only rightful interpreter. Tavad describes the Tridentine view in these words:

The dynamic element which constitutes the source (*fons*) of all saving truth and all Christian behavior, is the Gospel of Christ, the Word spoken by Christ and communicated to the Church through the Apostles. It is a living Word. It carries the power of the Holy Spirit. This dynamic element uses two sets of vessels: Holy Scripture and traditions. In as far as they convey the same Gospel of Christ, in as far as they channel the original impetus whereby the Spirit moved the Apostles, both Scriptures and traditions are entitled to the same adhesion of faith. . . .

This would logically imply that the whole Gospel is contained in Scripture as it is also contained in the traditions. Yet this was not made explicit at Trent. In view of divergences on this among the Bishops, it could hardly have been explicit. Nevertheless, the weight of the debates favours this implication. For the opposite conception, that the Gospel is only partly in Scripture and partly in the traditions, was explicitly excluded.¹⁰

Roman theologians today venture to suggest that there is need to reassess the principle "sola Scriptura." The implication is that the Church has never officially taught anything else but a principle like this. The post-Tridentine theologians, they hold, were led by the sharpness of the Reformation dispute, to misread the decrees of Trent and to accept too readily the artificial distinction between two of God's great gifts, Holy Writ and Holy Church, the latter embracing the apostolic tradition. As a result, the two realities have been wrongly set at opposite poles, whereas the concern should have been one of inclusion, since Holy Writ and Holy Church cannot be conceived at all apart from each other. In this sense, therefore, the Church has always taught a "sola Scriptura".

This is the formula which Roman Catholic theologians have offered their Church in a crucial day, when Communism has loomed large as a formidable foe on the one hand, and when the Christian world as a whole has throbbled with ecumenical possibilities for unity in the Body of Christ on the other hand. The Church of Rome can remain indifferent to neither one of the threats that are posed, particularly the latter. In the reunification of splintered Christendom it naturally feels that it must lead the way, as the rightful Mother of the broken family. And basic in this whole ef-

fort is a theology of the Word which will draw back the wayward sons and daughters who were separated from the Church through the Reformation. No doubt Tavad expresses the strategy which is in the mind of the Church, at least as far as the doctrine on the Word is concerned, when he concludes his significant study on the relationship of the Church and the Word with these words: "The secret of re-integration, or of Christian unity, or of a theology of ecumenism (whatever name we choose to give this) may lie in opening a way back to an inclusive concept of Scripture and of the Church. . . . They are ultimately one, though one in two. The Church implies the Scripture as the Scripture implies the Church."¹¹

Only the Church of Rome is conceived as fulfilling the divine purpose of the Holy Spirit in this way, since it alone is the living voice of God through which continuing revelation can be given to meet the exigencies and the needs of each new day or era. It is right here that all other Christian bodies fail, according to Catholic thinking. Karl Adam has summed up this position succinctly in his popular book, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, in the following way: "All other Christian bodies, in so far as they have maintained a positive belief, have attached themselves to a fixed and rigid principle. In Lutheranism and Calvinism it is the letter of the Bible; in the schismatical churches of the East it is the Bible and 'passive' tradition, that is to say, the tradition of the ancient Fathers and most ancient Councils. . . . Or there is the opposite danger, that in an effort to accommodate religion to modern needs and requirements, its inner connection with revelation is sacrificed, and an entirely novel Christianity, the religion of German idealism, or what you will, is summoned into life. This is the danger that menaces Protestantism. But Catholicism is safe from both possibilities."¹² On what grounds does the German Catholic theologian, Adam, feel such confidence? He supplies the traditional answer of Rome: "It is the spirit of revelation living in the Church, the vitality and consistency of Catholic thought, that 'active tradition,' as the schoolmen call it, which prevents any injury to the Catholic whole and ever restores its massive unity and inward harmony."¹³

To which Luther's answer would have rung, "*Schwaermerei!*" and if he had known English, "*balderdash!*" While Luther's formal principle in theology remained *sola Scriptura*, the formal principle for the theology of Rome is still very patently a not-so-well-disguised combination of enthusiasm and rationalism. To the extent that Luther's principle still operates in the Protestant world today, it is inconceivable that any really fruitful dialogue can take place and any real progress towards ecumenical unity can come about between Rome and the Protestant communions in divided Christendom. It is unfortunate, to say the least, but *sola Scriptura* is a Joseph's coat in modern theological discussions, with one color and meaning for Roman Catholics, another for Lutherans, and apparently still another—though this is no concern in our present discussion—in the various Protestant groups.

In the light of the foregoing, it would appear that optimism over the fruitfulness of Roman Catholic-Protestant dialogue is unfounded. While the Church of Rome has continued to support the inspired character of the Holy Scriptures, it has at the same time yielded not an inch in its position on the inspired nature of the living tradition in the Church. This has forced the Church's theologians into the difficult task of attempting to show that these are not two different sources of revelation, equally complete and equally authoritative, and to present cogent reasoning for the need of the one, if the other is a totally adequate source of knowing the whole counsel of God for His Church. Scholars like Carl Rahner have recognized the fearful dilemma which is set up within the Church when in defense of the infallible teaching office of the Church it is claimed that the Church could get along without the inspired Scriptures. Like Tavad, he contends that the Council of Trent set up no such dilemma by its decrees, though later post-Tridentine theologians did.¹⁴

Inspiration and Canonicity

As far as Rome and the inspiration of Scripture are concerned, Rahner's views may perhaps serve as typical and representative of contemporary Catholic writing and thinking on the subject. In his monograph, *Inspiration in the Bible*, he states: "We assume the acceptance of the traditional concept of inspiration. . . . The Scriptures have God as their author: He is the 'author' in the literary sense of the word, because He inspired the Scriptures. This inspiration does not consist of the fact that the Scriptures have been accepted as canonical by the Church, nor that they interpret free from error the revelation of God. It would be more true to say that inspiration consists in the fact that God supernaturally illuminates the human author in the perception of the content and of the essential plan of the book, and moves him to write freely on all and only that which God wants to be written."¹⁵

This statement carefully reproduces what Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical letter on the promotion of biblical studies, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, had declared in 1943: "Inspired by the Divine Spirit, the Sacred Writers composed those books, which God, in His paternal charity towards the human race designed to bestow on them. . . . This heaven-sent treasure Holy Church considers as the most precious source of doctrine on faith and morals. In our own time the Vatican Council, with the object of condemning false doctrines regarding inspiration, declared that these same books were to be regarded by the Church as sacred and canonical, 'not because, having been composed by human industry, they were afterwards approved by her authority, nor merely because they contain revelation without error, but because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God for their author, and as such were handed down to the Church herself."¹⁶

Higher criticism, entering into the Biblical arena, shook not only naive Biblical scholarship among some Protestants but also dis-

turbed the doctrinal tranquillity of the Church of Rome. Doctrines such as the inspiration of Scripture, appeared to cry loudly for renewed study and appraisal, and, to some extent, for recasting and new formulation. "The Holy Book lost that halo of absolute and undisputed truth in all matters which its isolation secured for it formerly."¹⁷ As the human aspects of the Bible came to be emphasized, apparently a few Romanists, too, were inclined to think of the Bible as inspired to the extent and in the way that other books or poems are sometimes spoken of as inspired. Others, less willing to yield to liberalism's rejection of all divine character, held that the Bible was inspired in the sense that God protected the writers from error as they wrote their material. Still others viewed the Bible as a human product which the Holy Spirit took over and gave a kind of divine approval.

There were also those who adopted the view that inspiration of the Sacred text must be limited to matters of faith and morality. Obviously, the Church of Rome did not escape completely the impact of liberalism.

In the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* of the scholarly Pope Leo XIII, the Church of Rome met the challenges of the new scientific inquiry by recognizing the human side of Scripture's origin, but by underscoring again, even to the extent of repeating the term "dictation," that the Scripture in all its parts must be accepted as divinely given. In this encyclical Leo reiterated what was conceived to be the historic position of the Church: "It matters not at all that the Holy Spirit took men as instruments for the writing, as if anything false might have slipped, not indeed from the first Author, but from the inspired writers. For, by supernatural power He so roused and moved them to write, He stood so near them, that they rightly grasped in mind all those things, and those only, which He Himself ordered, and willed faithfully to write them down, and expressed them properly with infallible truth; otherwise, He Himself could not be the author of all Sacred Scripture."¹⁸

The Psychological Problem

The Church of Rome, however, has not been unaware of the psychological problem involved in the doctrine of inspiration. Its theologians have thus held that with the positive supernatural influx of the Holy Spirit, the chief cause behind the phenomenon, the human elements also must be seen in proper relationship.

Catholic teaching is well summed up by the authors of *Guide to the Bible* in this statement: "Under the supremely efficacious impulse of the Spirit, the inspired man is led ineluctably to think, say, and write what Gods wills and as God wills; in that sense he is truly an instrument more strictly than when he acts of himself according to the natural order of things. But, on the other hand, the power that moves him is so delicate in exercising its mastery that not only is the man not diminished, but rather he is raised higher, he thinks better, he wills more strongly, in short, he carries out his

work with a freedom so respected and so complete that he may not be conscious of being guided by an almighty hand. In this sense, he is an instrument of a very special kind, proper to his nature as a thinking man, quite different from the material pen held by the writers."¹⁹

With the inspiration of the writers comes the question that pertains to the product itself. How much of it was inspired and how much not? Did divine inspiration extend "only to those parts of the Bible that treat of God or of moral and religious matters?" This is a matter which Pius XII in his Encyclical Letter *Humani Generis* labeled as "already often condemned."²⁰ In Catholic circles, therefore, those are termed "timid souls"²¹ who would attempt to restrict the charism of inspiration only to those parts of Scripture which have significance for faith and morals. They do so, comes the answer, because they do not understand the difference between revelation and inspiration. Inspiration covers all matters, also those where no teaching of truth is specially revealed. Accordingly, the Church of Rome has regularly opposed any kind of restriction on inspiration, contending that Scripture in its entirety and in all its parts is the inspired Word of God. Only one qualification is usually made as far as inspiration goes, namely, that it "does not mean that Scripture enjoys this charism always in the same degree."²²

This latter, "degrees of inspiration," is an interesting twist to the subject of inspiration in Roman Catholic theology today. For one thing, it enables theologians to include under the charism of inspiration—but in varying degrees—the sundry writers, redactors, and editors who were required for bringing the books of the Scripture to their final state of completion, in which then they were received by the Church. It is argued, however, that the various versions into which Holy Writ has been cast cannot be considered to be under the same charism of inspiration as the originals themselves. But this, in turn, is not to be understood as ruling out an official version like the Vulgate which, by virtue of its acceptance by the Church, has a unique authority and substantial authenticity above other translations.

"Sensus plenior"

Another topic of considerable importance in Roman theological circles today is the so-called *sensus plenior* of Scripture, according to which the subtler insights of the Bible, the deeper and fuller meaning intended by God, are held to be within the reach only of the devout interpreter who is equipped with fitting linguistic and textual skills. Because the casual reader of the Word lacks this equipment, he also misses the profounder nuances which the Scripture contains.

The fact that the *Heilsgeschichte* can be missed or ignored by the casual or indifferent reader of Holy Writ is, of course, no new discovery. Responsible Roman theologians, however, are cautious about pressing the *sensus plenior* theory for Scripture too far, lest the implication seem to be that the Holy Spirit reserves the fuller

understanding of the Word for those to whom a kind of auxiliary inspiration is given. This would mean that the charism of inspiration extended over the mind of the reader of Holy Writ as well as the writer. Undoubtedly the Encyclical Letter of Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, has helped to bridle attempts on the part of Roman theologians to press too far the distinction between a human and a divine—hence deeper—sense of the Scriptures. In the same context with his rejection of the idea that inspiration and inerrancy extend only to moral and religious matters, Pope Pius stated his Church's position on this subject: "They even wrongfully speak of a human sense of the Scriptures, beneath which a divine sense, which they say is the only infallible meaning, lies hidden."²³ Curiously, it is not chiefly his concern that the meaning of Scripture be thus preserved but the analogy of faith and the tradition of the Church. This is the papal fear: "They judge the doctrine of the Father and of the Teaching Church by the norm of Holy Scriptures, interpreted by the purely human reason of exegetes, instead of explaining Holy Scripture according to the mind of the Church which Christ our Lord has appointed guardian and interpreter of the whole deposit of divinely revealed truth."⁴⁹ At this point the spirit of Luther might again be heard crying: This is exactly the "Schwaermeri" that ought to be recognized and condemned by every Christian; the Church claims for itself exactly that which it condemns in individuals, the charism of inspiration; as little as God gave it to individuals in our day, so little did He give it to the Church!

Criterion for inspiration

The criterion for establishing the inspiration of the books of Scripture is another topic of current discussion in Roman theology. It is no surprise that God, who gave His Word supernaturally, is described in contemporary Catholic literature as the God who also chooses to use the Church as His agency for authenticating the inspired books. "This criterion can only be the word of the Church, which proposes that divine revelation to the faith of her children,"²⁵ state the authors of the well written *Guide to the Bible*.

In summary of the so-called criteria for the inspiration of Scripture Smyth states: "An independent scrutiny of internal criteria always tends to reveal their futility. They cannot furnish conclusive evidence for such operations of the Holy Ghost as inspiration demands. Nor could such a fact be left to individual decision. The inspired books form a part of the *depositum fidei*, whose custodian is the Church. Only an objective, infallible and universal criterion can establish their identity."²⁶ This is stated on the grounds that God alone can tell us which books are inspired, even as He alone knows whom He has inspired for the task. God directs the Church to the two available sources, Scripture and Tradition. It is in them alone, Smyth avers, that the criterion of inspiration must be sought.

Smyth is frank to admit that "it is independently maintained that the canonization of all the extant writings of the Apostles was not due to the fact that their apostolic origin guaranteed their inspira-

tion, but to the divine testimony of tradition concerning each particular book."²⁷ Apparently many who have spoken strongly for apostolicity as the criterion of inspiration have commonly associated with this the idea that in the early church the above was true by divine action through the Church.

That there is considerable latitude permitted to Catholic theologians on the subject of the criterion of inspiration Smyth shows by this statement: "A number of Catholic authors are firmly opposed to apostolic authorship as a positive criterion of inspiration. They not merely affirm tradition to be the only adequate and universal criterion of inspired writing, but the only criterion at all, apart from scriptural warrant for certain books."²⁸ At the same time, Smyth believes that to rule out apostolicity entirely as a positive criterion of inspiration is carrying the argument too far. While he does not discount the importance of the appeal to tradition, he also claims. "The above appeals to early tradition, upon which much weight is justly laid, still leave obscure the precise criterion on which that tradition had in the first place accepted the books as inspired—whether upon a distinct divine attestation of each book, or by the application of a revealed criterion, such as apostolicity."²⁹ Smyth then summarizes his brief in behalf of apostolicity as a positive factor in determining inspiration for the books by stating: "I would say that neither tradition nor the nature of inspiration can be directly invoked against its validity. The criterion must be judged on its own merits. . . ." ³⁰

The amazing thing in Smyth's scholarly presentation, or perhaps not so amazing when one recalls that he is a dutiful theologian who respects the pretensions of his church, is that after stating a rather strong case for the criterion of apostolicity he meekly brings his explorations back into the accustomed pathways and says: "The only universal, infallible, and objective criterion is tradition. Herein all Catholics agree, and, as I think, without prejudice to their further explanation how the Church in the first place arrived at certainty concerning the inspiration of these books, provided, of course, that the explanation rests ultimately on *revelation*."³¹ Whatever value research in the Biblical area might have for the Catholic scholar, also in such a primary matter as apostolic authorship, it obviously can never supersede or challenge the primacy of the Church's authority. Catholic theologians are bound to carry on their scholarly pursuits within the prescribed limits of the principle expressed in this statement: "They may themselves examine the historical origin of the sacred books and discuss critically the genuineness of some of them. But in order to know if such a text or such a form of the text belongs to inspired Scripture, they can only submissively rely upon the sovereign judgment of the Church."³²

Scripture and Inerrancy

The case for inerrancy of Scripture is not much different. Generally it will be found that Catholic theologians concur in defending

the view that the Scriptures are without error. Thus Pius XII in the Papal Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* drew the following significant analogy: "For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, 'except sin,' so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error."³³ And Karl Adam, seeking to express the faith of each Catholic adherent, says of him with regard to his attitude toward Scripture: "Certainly he regards the Bible as a sacred book, written by the hand of God and therefore unerring in all its parts."³⁴ At the same time the *ecclesia docens* reserves for itself the right to interpret this inerrancy in keeping with its teaching authority, this being tantamount to an infallible judgment. As a matter of fact the Church is conceived to be the divine vehicle through which the incomplete revelation contained in the Bible is completed.

Pius XII urged his theologians to avoid seeking security in the *status quo*, especially in closing the door to new discoveries by the adoption of definite solutions to certain problems or questions, advising rather that they "should abhor that intemperate zeal which imagines that whatever is new should for that very reason be opposed or suspected."³⁵

The tendency among recent Catholic theologians has been to become more daring in their espousal of some of higher criticism's attitudes and contentions. The Scripture's inerrancy is a case in point. The term has come to be modified and qualified in an effort to gain a kind of scientific respectability for Biblical theology. A statement like the following exemplifies this new tack in Roman Catholic teaching on the subject of Scriptural inerrancy: "Inerrancy is guaranteed by inspiration when truth is at stake, but inerrancy is not always involved, because truth is not always at stake."³⁶ This maneuver in Biblical interpretation is very similar to that which has characterized Protestant theology under the influence of liberalism. On difficult questions in the area of reconciliation between science and the Biblical account, such as the creation story in the first chapters of *Genesis*, it is now commonly held within the Church of Rome, that the ancient writers employed thought-forms and concepts which were adequate for their day but are no longer so. "The sacred writers did not speak of the structure of the universe with scientific accuracy, for the essentially religious purpose assigned to them by the Holy Spirit did not in any way include the teaching of such profane truth. They could speak of these things according to the views held in their days; they themselves shared such views but they did not make them the object of their teaching, and thus they do not lead us astray. For—and therein lies precisely their privilege of inerrancy—under inspiration they touched on such natural phenomena only in order to offer thereby a religious teaching which itself was true."³⁷

It may be surprising to hear theologians within the papal communion adopt views and explanations, as they juggle the inerrancy question, which verge closely on the demythologizing techniques

applied by many Protestant scholars to Scripture. But these Catholic scholars have apparently taken their cue and encouragement from the papal encyclicals which in recent years have given approval to renewed study and scholarship in the Biblical field. Thus the authors of the *Guide to the Bible* refer to a key phrase in Pope Leo XIII's *Encyclical Providentissimus* to show that some things in Scripture must be understood in terms of the language of that day which was based on "what seems apparent to the senses."³⁸ This, the same writers explain, does not imply that the Biblical writer is unconcerned with historical facts, but his concern is merely "with knowing and relating the fact only to the extent that it belongs to the spiritual content which alone is of value to him."³⁹ On this basis, therefore, and on the grounds that the Bible was not intended to be "a work of scientific history," Roman theologians find it possible to reject certain features of the creation account while preserving intact the truth that God is the Creator, albeit through a process of evolution.

Sliding-scale "Inerrancy"

So-called errors in the Biblical books are disposed of in much the same way. Following the lead of the Biblical Commission, theologians in the Church of Rome distinguish today between such terms as "assert," and "suggest," each of which expresses a lesser degree of affirmation, and apply this as a kind of slide-rule to certain things in Scripture. "The charism of inspiration," runs the argument concerning the Biblical author, "does not enlighten all his thoughts and does not correct all errors to the point of conferring omniscience; it enlightens him to make him write this or that book, intended for this or that actual purpose, and guarantees his knowledge only to the extent that this matters directly to his purpose. Hence he will continue to entertain on many points the erroneous notions of his natural knowledge, and it may well be, it will even happen necessarily, that such errors will show through in many a passage of his book; yet they will not damage his teaching of truth because such errors do not belong to his formal teaching, but constitute its material accompaniment about which he does not commit himself as an author and about which God likewise does not pledge authority. There may be in the Sacred Book many true affirmations which do not fall under the privilege of inerrancy because they are not taught. They are inspired because they play their part in the work as a whole which God causes to be written; but they are not inerrant, because that part is subordinate and is not necessarily bound up with the essential message which is the proper object to the teaching of the book."⁴⁰

To observers from the outside it would appear that Roman theologians have departed from the Church's traditional teaching on the inspired Scriptures as an inerrant Word and have yielded to the pressures of other disciplines in their definitions of truth. Traditionally the position of Rome has been expressed like this: "No point has been affirmed more definitely and clearly by Tradition than the

inerrancy of the Sacred Scriptures." The same writer goes on to add: "There is no actual, formal error in the Bible; it is impossible for error to exist in the Bible."⁴¹ While the author of this statement, John P. Weisengoff, appears to defend forthrightly Rome's teaching on inerrancy against all comers, it is also plain that he has qualified the matter of inerrancy by the introduction of the phrase, "no formal error." The issue then becomes a semantic question, revolving on the meaning of the word "error" and the adjective "formal". Can the Church settle on a simple and categorical definition of the terms? This is the nub of the problem for the Roman Church, it would seem. Weisengoff speaks to this concern and need for clarification of terms on the subject of inspiration and inerrancy: "The point that needs definition is the phrase 'formal error'. This may be called *the Biblical question*. It is the most difficult and delicate part of the study of the doctrine of inspiration."⁴² To his way of thinking the issue will not be soon resolved but "will take centuries for the Church and ecclesiastical science to settle."⁴³

While the Church of Rome has shown itself to be extremely flexible in entertaining divergent views among its theologians, allowing them to seek for new modes and expressions in keeping the Church's dogma relevant to each new day, it will never allow any new thought to disturb its position of authority nor the solidarity and unity of its membership.

The constant and abiding principle on which Rome lives and has its being is the final supremacy of the Church, which is the living voice of God for this day. In view of this, the significance of the Bible as God's inspired revelation to the world pales into secondary and subordinate position. Rome cannot be expected to leave the moorings which it set deeply at Trent. It is not that Rome has no concern for the Bible, that it has not in ages past done much to preserve its text and amass a treasury of testimony in its behalf. But the fact is, "despite its massiveness, it suffers from certain defects which render inarticulate what the Bible has to say to us, and fuses it too simply with what the Church says. It is not the Roman view that can be recommended to men whose interest in the Bible has been newly stirred."⁴⁴

NOTES

1. Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, p. 142.
2. Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, p. 155.
3. Geo. H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church*, p. 7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 54. (Tavard here quotes d'Ailly.)
8. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
12. Adam, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Carl Rabner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, p. 35.
15. Rabner, *op. cit.*, pp. 9 f.

16. *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XII on Promotion of Biblical Studies, 1943, intro. para. 1.
17. A. Robert and A. Tricot. *Guide to the Bible*. Vol. I, p. 16.
18. H. Denzinger. *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, p. 493.
19. Robert and Tricot, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
20. *Humani Generis*, Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XII, Aug. 12, 1950, p. 22.
21. Robert and Tricot, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Humani Generis*, par. 22. (Italics added for emphasis.)
24. *Ibid.*
25. Robert and Tricot, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
26. Kevin Smyth, "The Criterion of New Testament Inspiration," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, II (July, 1940), 233.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
32. Robert and Tricot, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
33. *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, par. 37.
34. Karl Adam, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
35. *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, par. 47.
36. Robert and Tricot, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
38. Quoted in Robert and Tricot, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
41. John P. Weisengoff, "Inerrancy of the Old Testament in Religious Matters," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, XVII (April, 1955), 250.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 131. (Italics are the author's own.)
43. *Ibid.*
44. J.K.S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture*, p. 8.