

**PART FOUR:
CATHOLIC HERMENEUTICS**

INTRODUCTION TO PART FOUR

The term Catholic hermeneutics refers to the understanding of Christianity within Roman Catholicism. It differs from the theory and practice of Catholic Biblical interpretation, with which it might be confused, and marks the appropriation by Catholic theology of philosophic hermeneutics. The latter resists brief definition, but can be called the study of humanity's participation in the knowledge and truth mediated by history. Hence Catholic hermeneutics is the understanding of Christian knowledge and truth within the Catholic tradition.

Two objections to the term Catholic hermeneutics present themselves. The first is that the term suggests the existence of a discipline, within philosophical hermeneutics, which is particularly Catholic. The positing of such a discipline, one might object, implicitly denies the universality of hermeneutics. The claim to universality of hermeneutics is that all acts of understanding are primarily achieved by means of a synthesis of (not a deduction from) experience, and are rooted in history. This is as true for Catholics as it is for Protestants and Jews, not to mention scientists, politicians, storekeepers and plumbers. Does the term Catholic hermeneutics mean that Catholics are an exception to the universality of the hermeneutical phenomenon?

The second objection to the term has to do with the question of scientific validity. It remains the claim of science, even in an age which is aware of the dependency of scientific work upon largely-undiscussed paradigms or presuppositions, that the application of an accepted investigative methodology achieves scientific results upon which a general consensus can be built. Philosophical hermeneutics, for example, claims to describe the phenomenon of understanding which is there for all to see. The term Catholic hermeneutics, however, suggests a difference between the general phenomenon and the particular Catholic expression of it. One might object that the term puts the scientific status of Catholic theology in question.

In answer to the first objection, it must be said that Catholic hermeneutics is not a philosophy of interpretation, but a particular example of the general philosophical thesis that interpretation always takes place within a tradition. The Catholic grasp of Christianity, which grows out of and expresses a theological tradition, exemplifies what Heidegger has called the historicity of understanding. Understanding is shaped by the historical forces operating within every individual, and the act of understanding expresses and develops the tradition within which the individual stands. The Catholic interpreter, educated within the Church, understands things according to what can only be called a Catholic interpretation of reality. Concrete acts of understanding refine and transmit that interpretation. Catholic hermeneutics is thus no exception to the universality of hermeneutics, but an illustration of it.

In answer to the second objection, that Catholic hermeneutics is of questionable scientific stature, two things need to be said. First, it is the insight of philosophical hermeneutics that all acts of understanding are historically contingent. Knowledge is secured within a context provided by history itself. The full significance of any matter can be expressed only by anticipation of the end of history. If this is the case, then there exists no a priori reason why the Catholic understanding of Christianity, because it is rooted in a particular history, should be any less scientific than other possible understandings. Second, philosophical hermeneutics teaches that every explicit act of

knowledge is based upon inexplicit assumptions which cannot be exhaustively thematized. This suggests that even the most rigorous scientist makes assumptions which escape critical scrutiny, and the same is true for the theologian. To be sure, the theologian can give a sound rationale for faith, the kind of treatment one finds in the literature of Christian apologetics. But the belief in the realities to which such literature attests cannot be reduced to rational argument. Every act of belief, religious or otherwise, presupposes a relation to the object of belief which always remains in part inexplicitly known. Far from compromising the scientific value of the believer's knowledge, such an act expresses the believer's historical being.

Catholic hermeneutics, while differing from philosophical hermeneutics as a particular illustration differs from a general principle, is not thereby curtailed in scientific value. This needs to be said in light of the profound contrast between the Catholic understanding of reality and certain assumptions encountered in contemporary scientific and philosophical discussions. While scientific work is highly honored within the Catholic world, it is always situated there within a divine and human context underived from the results of scientific investigation. The dimensions of this context are visible in the Catholic theology of tradition. Our discussion of it revealed the authoritative role of the magisterium as judge in cases of Scriptural and dogmatic dispute, the irreducibility of dogmatic tradition to a historical analysis of first-century documents, and the inadequacy of Scriptural interpretation uninformed by Church tradition. These aspects of the theology of tradition contradict a certain notion of science. According to this notion, the scientific enterprise is wholly emancipated from authority, documentary evidence is the only admissible historical proof of a tradition's antiquity, and independence from tradition is the only guarantor of the truth (i.e., objectivity) of interpretation. If this notion of science were canonical, then Catholic hermeneutics would be unscientific.

Philosophical hermeneutics, however, has put such a notion of science in question. The work of Hegel and Heidegger, we have seen, laid the groundwork for philosophical hermeneutics by means of an analysis of history and being. Hegel's philosophy of history, which emphasizes the presence of spirit in every epoch, countered the tendency of Enlightenment thought to dismiss the value of tradition. Heidegger's interrogation of the human being or Dasein, rooted in history and anticipating the future, suggests the intimate union of being and time. Hegel and Heidegger, in short, foreshadowed the critique in philosophical hermeneutics of that notion of science which regards it as eternally true and independent of the knower. In the work of Gadamer, philosophical hermeneutics emerges as a corrective to the all-embracing claims of scientific methodology. The Gadamerian insight into the acknowledgment of authority as an act of knowledge exposes the rationalist distrust of authority as itself a source of prejudice. The doctrine of application suggests that every interpretation of a document applies it to a particular and new situation, thus changing the context within which the document has its meaning. And Gadamer's treatment of effective history, which reveals how history remains effective in ways of which the interpreter is never fully aware, implies that what science accepts as proven is an expression of the history which that science helps constitute. Philosophical hermeneutics compels a re-examination of the assumptions which would exclude theology in general, and Catholic theology in particular, from the realm of science.

The apparent congeniality of philosophical hermeneutics and the Catholic theology of tradition is the topic of this final section of the dissertation. What light does hermeneutics shed

upon the Catholic theology? How does Catholic theology make the generalizations of hermeneutics concretely real? These general questions shall be investigated by means of a correlation between the major features of the theology of tradition and the central doctrines of the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and his predecessors. The Catholic distinction between objective and active tradition, which treats the relation between the tradition and those who transmit it, shall be examined in the light of the doctrine of application. This shall be the focus of Chapter 11, which will pose in Catholic terms the question of the knower and the known. Chapter 12 shall investigate the theological distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition from the perspective of effective history. In this chapter we shall raise the question of the truth of Catholic tradition and its verification. In Chapter 13, the issue of the relative sufficiency of Scripture and tradition shall be broached in terms of the nature of authority. The relation between the facts of revelation and their value is the central question to be explored. By means of these questions the theology of tradition shall be brought into the light shed by philosophical hermeneutics, and the generalizations of hermeneutical theory shall be fleshed out in Catholic theology.

Catholic hermeneutics, however, remains the central focus; the value of philosophical hermeneutics is here subordinate to it. contribution to Catholic theology (and not to philosophy) is the primary aim of this section of the dissertation, which presupposes the circle-structure of understanding. This means, in theological terms, that faith seeks understanding – only secondarily does understanding lead to faith. No attempt shall be made, in the chapters which follow, to find a hermeneutical perspective outside of faith which will enable an independent critique of the theology of tradition. On the contrary, it is assumed that theology describes a reality to which the theologian belongs. The main theological task is not to stand apart from the doctrines of such men as Cardinals Franzelin and Billot, criticizing their work from the standpoint of a theology which has restored the magisterium to its proper context within the whole of the Church. That is altogether too easy, and shows scant appreciation for the life of tradition. Rather, the task is to probe the truth of their doctrines, to assume, as Gadamer might say, that the theologians of tradition are superior in insight to the theologians for whom the relation to tradition is not central.

The objection to such a procedure is that it apparently denies the critical function of theology. The procedure seems to reduce the theologian to a mere functionary of tradition, one who presumes the validity and so ensures the continuation of the tradition, regardless of its value. This being the case, all possibility of reform would vanish. To this objection, however, there is a persuasive answer. It is the answer of the Second Vatican Council which, from the perspective of Catholic hermeneutics, was nothing other than a reform of the Church's tradition in the name of tradition itself. This is no place for even an abbreviated treatment of the theology of Vatican II. But an example may suffice to show how a reform of the Church's traditions is possible by means of tradition.

The example is the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, promulgated on November 21, 1964. The second chapter of the constitution, entitled "The People of God," emphasizes that the Church is less an institution presided over by a hierarchy than a community drawn together by God's own word. The chapter refers to the entirety of the Church as the common priesthood of the faithful, in which all – and not just the ordained clergy – have an active role. All join in the offering of the Eucharist, and all share in Christ's prophetic office. This chapter marks a reform of the Catholic tradition according to which the clergy, and especially the magisterium, had far and

away the greatest dignity in the life of the Church. Instead, the entire people of God is viewed in the constitution as possessing a common role. This reform, and indeed all the reforms implicit in the various conciliar documents, were not achieved by standing outside the Catholic tradition and imposing upon it a critical scheme. On the contrary, the reform was an expression of the Church's own traditions, Scriptural, sacramental, and ecclesiastical, perceived in a modern light.

This is, in outline, the response to those who would censure Catholic hermeneutics for refusing to exercise its critical rights over against tradition. An investigation of the theology of tradition which presupposes its value from the outset is not prevented from criticizing it. The Catholic understanding of theology, I would assert, has always been a critical one. But its criticisms, instead of emanating from outside tradition, are rather an expression of it. The modern theology of tradition attempted to grasp this idea by insisting upon the divinity and immutability of tradition. Such conceptions, however, did little justice to the historical nature of understanding. It is the thesis of this final section that the aims of the theology of tradition are better understood in terms of the reflection on history central to philosophical hermeneutics. The goal is an integration of this theology and philosophy. The next three chapters shall accomplish such an integration, which the term Catholic hermeneutics is meant to describe.