

Marian Studies

Volume 35 *Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth National Convention of The Mariological Society of America held in Washington, D.C.*

Article 13

1984

Divine Faith, Private Revelation, Popular Devotion

Ronald David Lawler

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lawler, Ronald David (1984) "Divine Faith, Private Revelation, Popular Devotion," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 35, Article 13.
Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol35/iss1/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

DIVINE FAITH, PRIVATE REVELATION, POPULAR DEVOTION

We live in an age confused about the nature of divine faith, puzzled and somewhat embarrassed about the idea of private revelations that might indicate (literally and unequivocally) a thrust of God's will for contemporary people, and rather unprepared to begin discussing (in the midst of so divided a community) the significance of popular devotion.

What is in fact the core of our faith? Is there an infinite, personal and good God who is so near to us, and so responsive to our hunger for the truth that the heart loves, that he has made his own word accessible to us, a word that is altogether and enduringly true? Or are the alleged words of God something far less: the inadequate efforts of diverse cultures (moved by divine impulses) to express the inexpressible depths of divinity? Are the alleged realities toward which the words of God are said to point really what we long for them to be: a Word made flesh, a holy eternal Trinity, a community made holy by the sacramental touches of the risen Lord? Or is the point of a living faith not the making known of what truly is, but the creating of symbols and modes of thinking that comfort and give creative energies to people of diverse ages, in the midst of darkness?

Is private revelation a distraction, taking our attention from the centrality due to the mystery of Christ? Or does the expectation of such revelation flow from outmoded ways of thinking? Does it suppose that there is a personal (and perhaps "interfering") God who offers "cheap graces" and ready-made solutions, when the "mature Catholic" should be carving out new paths, responsive to modern ways of thinking? And are popular devotions that are associated with alleged private revelations of recent time supportive of or hurtful to authentic and appropriate forms of spirituality?

In this paper I would like to reflect on some aspects of these questions.

I. *Contemporary Attitudes Toward Private Revelations
and Popular Devotions*

Some Catholics are embarrassed by the Marian pieties of the present Holy Father. There were complaints in the press when Pope John Paul urged Ordinaries to join him in consecrating their Churches to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.¹ Many feel distressed at his forms of Marian devotion: his affection for shrines recalling special apparitions of our Lady, and his invitations to the faithful toward specific forms of piety. All this, for some, is religion of too popular and local a flavor. Despite what has been said in a number of recent Church documents (such as *Marialis Cultus* and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*), many retain a fear of popular religiosity. They would like a wall of separation (not simply a clear distinction) between divine faith publicly proclaimed and private revelations, between universal forms of worship and prayer, and perhaps dubious folk forms of devotion and piety.

The Holy Father does indeed project a whole-hearted confidence that the Lord, through his Blessed Mother, has in gracious concrete ways touched the Church with special kindnesses at Lourdes, at Guadalupe, at Fatima; and that in such places the faithful have been called to forms of response important in animating the central thrust of their lives of faith.²

Many find these expressions of support for specific private revelations and these hearty commendations of specific private devotions misleading. Objections come from radically opposed positions. The superficial (some might say the "conservative") objection is that they focus attention on peripheral matters, on special promises and warnings and particular little devotions, to the detriment of the central message of faith. The profounder objection (some might say the "radical" objection) is that modern Marian devotion is too supportive of the received understandings of the central meaning of faith. For some they suggest too traditional a view: an understanding of faith that for certain

¹ Cf., e.g., P. Hebblewaite, "Consecration to Mary a Loyalty Test," *National Catholic Reporter* (March 16, 1984) 20: 10.

² See, e.g., his *Sermon* at Fatima on May 13, 1982: Pope John Paul II, "The Message of Mary's Maternal Love," in *Origins* (May 27, 1982) 12:17.

modern spirits seems too narrowing or outmoded; a way of looking at faith that is not positively responsive to recent ways of rethinking what faith is, an approach which some have felt pastorally necessary today.³ There is no small tie between some of the opposition to popular Marian devotions and the defense of revisionary positions on the entire nature of faith and on the content of the mystery of faith.

While the Church has regularly taught that the faithful are in general bound to believe only that revelation which is publicly proclaimed in the Church, a revelation completed in Christ, it does not follow that it is inappropriate for Church leaders to express publicly gratitude for private revelations and praise for the forms of popular devotions associated with them.

Traditional Acceptance of Private Revelation. In fact, the Church has from the beginning acknowledged the importance for the inner lives of the faithful of special uncovenanted gifts of the Spirit such as those we find in private revelations.⁴ (These are certainly not honored as giving us new objects of faith, but as calling us back to faithfulness in our mode of adhering to all that has been proclaimed.)

The happy liturgical renewal of our time knows well the utter centrality of the Eucharistic sacrifice. But, from the length and breadth of Church experience, it knows also the role popular devotions have had in drawing multitudes toward this central gift. Those who live today in Hispanic communities in our inner cities, as I do, taste and see how necessary popular Marian devotion (not unrelated to special apparitions and private revelations) is for our people. This devotion addresses the depths of the being of many of these people. It touches in their memory and feelings the most effective experiential approaches toward divine faith and love. And it is not simply the personal judgment of one or the other person that this is so; the broad experi-

³ Some indications of the wide range of reinterpretations of the meaning of faith and revelation can be found in A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

⁴ St. Paul discusses such "spiritual gifts" in the fourteenth chapter of I Corinthians, and gives special commendation to the gift of prophesy. "He who prophesies builds up the Church" (I Cor. 14:4).

ence of the Church in this matter led to the strong stresses on popular religiosity that the Synodal fathers, discussing methods of evangelizing, urged Pope Paul VI to emphasize in his *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, a message to which he had already called Church attention in *Marialis Cultus*.⁵

Surely it is not only simple souls, the peasants and the uneducated, who are invited to hear and appreciate the gifts God has given his people in prophetic utterances or private revelations, or in the private devotions which providentially stir nations and individuals to fervor. John Paul II is not alone among scholars and pastoral leaders in finding these gifts of God priceless. They are indispensable aids to, not rivals to, the public revelation and worship of the Church.⁶

II. *Divine Faith and Special Providential Gifts*

God's intimate closeness to each person. Acknowledgement of the reality and importance of private revelations could not have been a late development in the Christian community. The very nature of Catholic faith inclines the believer to consider private revelation a real possibility. The public faith of the Church salutes a God who is with us, a Father and a Son and a Spirit dwelling in each of the faithful, making a home in the heart of each.⁷ Our God is a providential God, whose activity takes into account every aspect of each precious person's life. His grace does not flood the world impersonally or randomly; it touches

⁵ See the brief document published by the Synodal Fathers at the end of their 1974 meeting: *In Spiritu Sancto* (October 25, 1974). Latin and Italian texts appeared in *Enchiridion Vaticanum* (Bologna: Edizione Dehoniane, 1979), Vol. 5, pp. 611-624.

⁶ The received teaching on the relationships between public revelation and private revelation and between liturgical prayer and private prayer are confirmed by the Second Vatican Council in its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* and its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*.

⁷ Cf. Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation* "Evangelization in the Modern World," (December 8, 1975), n. 48 ff.

104 *Divine Faith, Private Revelation, Popular Devotion*

each heart in ways chosen by God himself for each person.⁸ He is Lord of a family of faith, giving gifts to each directly and also through the ministry of others; and when he gives us grace through the activity of others, he himself dwells in them and is personally present to us in their activity. The God of our faith is not one of the gods of alien philosophies, who, without valid Baptism, have been injected as central figures in some new religious visions mistakenly present at times as alternate expressions of an authentic Catholic faith.⁹ He is not a God whose grandeur separates him from concern with the daily needs of his people, not a God incapable of successfully communicating with them (even in uncovenanted ways), not a God so distant that he could not "interfere" with a loving concern even in special and particular ways in the affairs of the people he loves with a great personal love.¹⁰

The account of divine faith given by the Second Vatican Council (in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*) would not lead one to consider private revelations as essentially improb-

⁸ The Second Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* makes especially clear that it is the personal relationship that God makes possible between himself and the believer that is the foundation of dogmatic faith. See especially chapter 1.

⁹ That the infinite Lord of all is unspeakably close to each of those whom he calls to friendship with himself is at the core of Gospel teaching; yet this fact seems forgotten in those revisionary theologies too dependent on agnostic modern philosophies. That God's providence is to be understood as a literal truth, that he personally knows and intimately cares for each person, is, of course, solemnly defined Catholic teaching. First Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith* (D-Sch, 3003).

¹⁰ Sometimes religious educators makes naive and astonishing suggestions that we need to fashion a "new idea of God," as if God's revelation of Himself were not the primary gift of divine revelation. One gets, at times, the impression that trading in the God of our fathers for a new model would be a modest but helpful step toward religious renewal. See, e.g., D. Piveteau and J. Dillon, *Resurgence of Religious Instruction* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Religious Education Press, 1977), "An Emerging Conception of God," pp. 108-124. Adventures of drawing alien gods from popular philosophies are not new among restless religious educators in Catholicism. See E. Gilson's account of such an adventure in thirteenth-century Averroism: E. Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Scribners, 1938), pp. 37-66.

able. One who believes in a personal and concerned God, such as the God described there, and of his ability successfully to reveal himself and his saving will, is not as likely to be nervous about private revelations as one whose understanding of God and of public divine revelation involves less genuinely personal intercommunion.

"Do not extinguish the Spirit!"¹¹ Saint Paul manifestly knew the difference between his own apostolic role in the Church, as a witness to public revelation to the mystery of Jesus, and the role of the somewhat random "prophet" summoned by the Spirit to speak in the midst of the praying community in a notably different way. But, there were personal and providential dispositions, in the context of public witnessing and ordinary Catholic faith, of a sort that prepared the heart to be open to private revelations as well. Public preaching did not depend on scholarship and rationalistic procedures: a living God, present and caring, was effectively doing things in the world when faith was preached and believed. It was he who made preaching successful; it was he who made it possible for the hearer to recognize Paul's words as the words of the Lord himself, and to affirm faith with utter confidence in the mystery of Jesus.¹²

¹¹ I Thess. 5:19.

¹² Much revisionary theology forgets the inner nature of personal faith as this has constantly been understood by the Church, and so finds it impossible to accept the entire certainty of the personal act of faith in a meaningfully proposed doctrine or creed. For received Catholic teaching, Christ yet lives and is *the* Teacher of faith. Signs graciously given by God are fortified by inner gifts and graces, so that the person who comes to faith in that very coming recognizes with certainty that it is the Lord who is causing the teaching of faith to be proposed, and that it is he who is inviting the hearer to believe Him, and so also to believe His saving Word. When the created person is so called to a living relationship with his God, he is enabled to assent, not in virtue of merely rational arguments, but in the distinctive light of the gift of faith. For standard accounts of this distinctive certainty of personal faith in God and in his words, and the inseparability of a complete act of faith from the activity of the Magisterium, see I. Alfaro, *Fides, Spes, Caritas* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1968), pp. 336-361; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, pp. 1-7. Cardinal Newman teaches this common position of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church in a pastoral rather than systematic way in sermons in his *Dis-*

Paul found that, in the community created by faith in the mystery of Jesus, God touched his people with other gifts (not always with the tidiness that a human administrator would prefer.)¹³ Through persons not given the task of apostolic witnessing to the faith, the faithful were touched in other ways. The leaders of the community watched carefully over the phenomena in which such gifts were apparently given, and sought to discern spirits carefully. But they knew that they could not antecedently limit the ways in which the living God would act in the midst of his people, calling all to faithfulness in every way to the mystery of Jesus.

In the first decades of faith, and through the centuries, the Church has proclaimed that all things needed have been revealed to us in Christ, and that no further public revelation is awaited until the day of Christ Jesus.¹⁴ (By no means does this suppose that the Holy Spirit fails to keep the proclamation and belief of faith a living and dynamic reality, or that there is no rich growth in understanding of the realities that have been revealed.) But there has also been a conviction that there is a distinctive place for the gracious and bracing support of the intervention that God makes through persons touched by the Spirit of God, through manifestations and revelations of diverse kinds. While these have functions different from those of the authentic proclaimer of the public faith of the Church, they do draw people in the special circumstances of their lives to be pierced to the heart, to attend with greater earnestness to the gospel call, and to escape from worldly misunderstandings of the word of God and its requirements. Christ "stepped into the tide of the years"¹⁵ in his Incarnation, as Augustine remarks;

courses Addressed to Mixed Congregations (London: Longmans, Green, New Impression 1916): "Nature and Grace," pp. 145-168; "Illuminating Grace," pp. 169-191; "Faith and Private Judgment," pp. 192-213; "Faith and Doubt," pp. 214-231. See also Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, Ch. 1.

¹³ See St. Paul's efforts to keep order in overseeing spiritual gifts in I Cor. 14:26-40.

¹⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, n. 4.

¹⁵ St. Augustine, *Sermon 190*, n. 1. (*PL* 38: 1010; *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 15, pp. 107-108).

and he never ceases, through a rich variety of gifts and graces, to call us back to the central gift of his grace. Karl Rahner notes that private revelations are not so much ordered to give information (certainly not to add to the public revelation entrusted to the Church) as to guide action, to direct our responses to the divine word in fruitful ways: they serve to “command,” to direct.¹⁶ Private revelations are not distractions, blocking attention to the central mystery of Christ. Rather, they are ordered toward helping the faithful in concrete ways (taking into account the special circumstances of their lives) to heed with greater love what is central to a life of living faith. Private devotions can be abused; private revelations can be misunderstood and misinterpreted. But the care of the public leaders of the Church is expected to guard against that. As the Synodal Fathers in 1974 noted, the central thrust of popular devotions—when they are wisely nourished by the pastors of the Church—is toward a resurgence of faith and love, toward a more personal adherence to what is utterly basic in Christian life.¹⁷

III. *Forgetfulness of the Full Meaning of Faith.*

Many sets of forces incline the faithful in our day to have a less than adequate realization of what faith means and what it requires of us. I speak here of *fides qua*, the faith *by which* we believe: the gracious but demanding gift that binds men so personally to the Lord, that makes him literally *the* witness they have found, the one Teacher they utterly believe.

Cardinal Newman used to say of the non-Catholic Christians of his time that for all their religious and moral earnestness, they did not much understand, much less approve of, faith precisely as *believing*.¹⁸ Many cultural forces inclined them to see the

¹⁶ Cited by P. de Letter, s.v. “Revelation, Private” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 12:447.

¹⁷ Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, n. 48 ff.

¹⁸ “Now I mean to say that the great mass of men in this country have not this particular virtue called faith, have not this virtue at all.” John Henry Newman, *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations*, New Impression (London: Longmans, Green, 1902), p. 194.

stance of a believer as a somewhat shameful one. To be prepared to accept the words of a pope or a council as simply true, as making demands upon the hearer, seemed demeaning to them. That this person or persons should speak, and one be required to believe: all this seemed unthinkable. One wished to keep one's soul in one's own hands. The very idea of conceding that God might choose another living person, not only to speak many beautiful things (from which one might pick and choose), but even to declare as true and essential things that seem most disturbing: all this is too much. If one makes room for spokesmen of God with authority—those whom God could make recognizable as declaring saving truth in his name—there is every danger to one's liberty and personal self guidance. Such a spokesman might speak dreadful things. He might tell us that we must accept the awful regime of the cross; he might even speak of eating flesh and drinking blood. One must retain the right to judge every word by one's own experience and insights. Who could risk expressing a faith so complete that it has no rational limits, a faith that is ready to affirm "whatever you say," because of the richness of the YOU that it has found?

Catholic faith, Newman acknowledged, must seem absurd to one who views it from without. It seems to be placing absolute confidence in the words of men, of bishops and popes—people whom history has not always found absolutely reliable. But really, there is only one teacher in the Catholic Church. And one has not become a mature Catholic until one sees through every other teacher, and hearing the voices of human teachers, says "yes" only to the Lord. The mature Catholic is one who, thanks to the personal mercies of the Lord, in inner graces and outward signs, has come to realize with utter certainty that when words are spoken in certain ways in the family of faith, it is the Lord who has spoken. And, because He is known by his mercy and because he is worthy of the stoutest *yes* of our hearts, we give our fullest assent to the meaningful message he causes to be proclaimed out of his great love.

The personal Lord yet teaches in the Church, in causing living persons to proclaim his word. The visible personal teachers, who have had the faith given them and believe it meaningfully, pro-

claim it in the sense in which it is true. In the visible Church, Christ causes the public proclamation of what he makes recognizable as his own words, through inner graces as well as through outward signs. But the magisterial proclamation is entirely essential. In a meaningful faith for a community, magisterium cannot be separated from Scripture and tradition.¹⁹ Paul was delighted and astonished that the Thessalonians heard him speaking the Gospel, and believed not Paul but the Lord. They said "yes" with full hearts to all he said, because they had come to believe the one who sent him. But Paul's magisterial speaking played an essential role in their coming to faith.

In the midst of the forces that make personal Catholic faith difficult today, recent private revelations at Marian shrines, and devotions of the kind that approved revelations encourage, profoundly support the renewal of such faith.

No one who reads attentively the reasons that Newman pointed out as underlying the rejection of doctrinal faith among non-Catholics in his time can fail to realize that many Catholics today are inclined to reject doctrinal faith for similar reasons. The decline of personal and doctrinal faith (belief *that* this is so *because* you have said it) has obvious social and cultural causes. Our education is immersed in relativism; the mass media that shape our lives create images and stimulate longings hard to reconcile with reality and with faith. We are torn in many ways and need new mercies to strengthen in us our faith.

The gifts we receive in Marian private revelations, and in the warm devotions they stir up so widely, serve faith today in ways that uncovenanted graces served the New Testament Church. At Corinth, the gifts of the Spirit in the midst of community prayer must have been startling at first. There is something odd and strange about all living, personal, and most real things. It is startling, too, that the Lord should have his Mother remind simple people of the personal depths of faith, of its simplicity and its profundity, and so help to strengthen all in the remembrance of the nature of personal faith and love. Such invitations to return

¹⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, n. 10.

110 *Divine Faith, Private Revelation, Popular Devotion*

to personal faith can appear very strange, very “enthusiastic.” But there is a tranquility in authentic Marian devotion as well.

Marian devotion proves an effective remedy to the kinds of dangers that most threaten Catholic life and thinking in our times. As we forget the personal nature of faith, such devotion reminds us, with a mighty but gentle force, of what the very core of Christianity is. As we forget the greatness of each person, such devotion, by its way of leading the greatest and wisest in the Church to salute Mary and her divine Son in the style that she has led the most unsophisticated to do, recalls us to many of the most essential convictions of faith. The Father graciously reveals to “little ones” what is far beyond the reach even of scholars if they do not have simple faith.²⁰ Everything in faith is for the little ones: the small blessings of private revelations, as well as the mighty blessings of the public faith of the family of God.

REV. RONALD D. LAWLER, O.F.M. CAP.
*Director, Institute for Advanced Studies
in Catholic Doctrine
St. John's University (Jamaica, N. Y.)*

²⁰ Matt. 11:25.