

June 25, 2006

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

There are two apparently irreconcilable aspects to the New Testament's affirmation of Natural Revelation.

On the one hand, it is affirmed that man is able to discover God's existence from examining His works in nature, because "since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead" (Romans 1:20). There is not a word in this text about faith. Indeed, how can one believe in what is "clearly seen"?

On the other hand, it is equally attested that "he who comes to God must *believe* that He is" (Hebrews 11:6). Faith, not reason, is affirmed here. However, if faith in God's existence is necessary, how am I to have faith in what I already know? How is it possible to know and believe in the same thing?

I did not make up this problem. The mutual exclusivity of faith and reason, when both are directed to the same object and under the same aspect, has always been recognized among rational men. Hugh of St. Victor was hardly alone when he asserted, "Those things that are entirely known by reason (*ex ratione omnino nota sunt*) cannot be believed, because they are known" (*De Sacramentis* 1.3.20). No faith is necessary, or even possible, in propositions demonstrated by reason. If, then, I already know God's existence by reason (as I most certainly do), how is it possible for me to believe it? And yet, if I do not believe in it, how can I come to God, as the Epistle to the Hebrews says?

Since both things are affirmed in Holy Scripture, however, one suspects there is a mystery here worthy of further consideration. I want to suggest two avenues to the question.

The first avenue, elaborated by St. Bonaventure, concentrates on the special sense of "knowing" when this word refers to God as an object. When a thinker arrives at the inference "God" at the end of a logical argument, he does not know God as he knows some other object of rational regard. He does not perceive God as he perceives, for

instance, the Principle of Contradiction, or the theorems of mathematics, or the validity of the Baroco Syllogism. God does not give form to his intellect in the same way that his intellect is informed by rational truths. Even as known, God remains God and therefore inaccessible to the mind's comprehension.

Bonaventure writes, "Someone who believes that God is one and is the Creator of all, if he should begin to know this same fact (*ipsum idem*) from arguments of rational necessity, does not for this reason stop believing; likewise, if someone should already know this, the arrival of faith does not remove the knowledge of it. Our experience testifies to this."

With regard to reason's knowledge of God's existence, Bonaventure says, "the light and certitude of this knowledge is not such that, having it, the light of faith is superfluous; indeed, it is necessary with it." Therefore, he concludes that, in the case of God, knowing and believing "are compatible, simultaneously and in the same respect" (*On the Sentences 3.24.2, 3*).

The Seraphic Doctor's approach to this question prompts a second one of my own. I begin with "contingent being"--those things that exist but do not have to exist (which is to say, everything except God). When I argue from the existence of contingent beings to the existence of Necessary Being (which I have always considered the most compelling and irreducible of the cosmological arguments), I do not arrive simply at an abstract rational truth, but at a Being on whom all other things, including myself, are *contingent*. The prefix of this word is the key. I arrive at a Being by whom all things else are touched (*con-tingo*).

This may be a purely rational process, at least until the moment I reach the inference of my argument, because the Being I reach, the Being on whom all other things depend, is necessarily a Being of volition, revealed in the very act of causing contingent things to be. For contingent being to exist, after all, it is obvious that some will or decision is required of the Necessary Being. Therefore, the Necessary Being must be personal, in a sense analogous to ourselves as persons, a Being who knows and wills.

I cannot relate to such a Being simply as a concept in my mind. My mind itself screams out against such a presumption, for to know God in this way is to be known by God. As a matter of experience, then, it

is impossible for me to separate *scire Deum* from *credo Deo*. That is to say, I am unable to affirm that God exists without recognizing and confessing my dependence on Him. Contingency here implies dependency. In the rational act of arriving at His existence I am drawn towards God as a personal Reality, the real God who knows me and wills me. I cannot help recognizing my utter dependence on Him, and the rational recognition of this dependence is faith. Indeed, it easily becomes hope and love.

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