

Association of Hebrew Catholics Lecture Series
The Mystery of Israel and the Church

Fall 2013 – Series 12

*Introduction to Theology:
Faith Seeking Understanding*

Talk #7

Motives of Credibility for Faith



© **Dr. Lawrence Feingold STD**
Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy
Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, Archdiocese of St. Louis, Missouri

Note: *This document contains the unedited text of Dr. Feingold's talk.
It will eventually undergo final editing for inclusion in the series of books being published by
The Miriam Press under the series title: "The Mystery of Israel and the Church".
If you find errors of any type, please send your observations to lfeingold@hebrewcatholic.org*

*This document may be copied and given to others. It may not be modified, sold, or placed on any web site.
The actual recording of this talk, as well as the talks from all series, may be found on the AHC website at:
<http://www.hebrewcatholic.net/studies/mystery-of-israel-church/>*



Association of Hebrew Catholics • 4120 W Pine Blvd • Saint Louis MO 63108
www.hebrewcatholic.org • ahc@hebrewcatholic.org

Motives of Credibility for Faith

The great difficulty in making the act of divine faith lies in determining when and where God has spoken. God does not appear directly to everyone; rather, He speaks to mankind through intermediaries who are entrusted with a divine mission of being the instruments of God's Revelation. These intermediaries are the prophets in the Old Testament; the Apostles and Evangelists; and the Magisterium of the Church; and, above all, through the humanity of Jesus Christ. However, when God speaks through intermediaries, it must be possible to recognize that they truly have a divine commission. Otherwise it would be extremely imprudent to believe, for one could be deceived by any charlatan or honestly deluded person into believing whatever they claimed was revealed to them by God. Therefore, prophets, apostles, and the Word Incarnate, must come equipped with divine credentials or *motives of credibility*.¹

Motives of credibility are supernatural signs that manifest the miraculous action of God above natural causes. Their purpose is to show that an alleged revelation from God is truly His Word, and not that of a false prophet. These motives allow us to make the transition from human faith in the word of a prophet to divine faith in God who speaks through the prophet. Proportionate motives of credibility make the act of faith reasonable and morally compelling. With sufficient motives of credibility, it is unreasonable not to believe; without such motives, it is unreasonable to believe. Belief in an alleged revelation that is not supported by sufficient reasons to think that God is its source would put one in danger of attributing mere human words and claims to God.

In the following discussion of motives of credibility it must always be remembered that God's grace aids the intellect in recognizing the motives of credibility. Thus the best preparation for discerning these motives is prayer combined with historical inquiry.

To show the divine origin of the Revelation received by Israel and the Church, there are three principal miraculous signs: the miracles worked by the prophets, Christ, and the Apostles; the prophecies about the Messiah and the Church; and the very existence of the Catholic Church, in that it can be seen to be something more than a merely human society, because of its universal spread, continuity, and holiness.² A fourth motive is the supernatural beauty

¹ This section is a modification of material first published in Feingold, *The Mystery of Israel and the Church*, vol. 2, *Things New and Old*, 4–11.

² The Catholic Church is a motive of credibility through its four marks: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

and wisdom of the Revelation itself, and of the Person of Christ in whom Revelation culminates, as will be explained below. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, quoting Vatican I, speaks of the first three motives of credibility:

Thus the miracles of Christ and the saints, prophecies, the Church's growth and holiness, and her fruitfulness and stability "are the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all"; they are "motives of credibility" (*motiva credibilitatis*), which show that the assent of faith is "by no means a blind impulse of the mind."³

With regard to the Church as a motive of credibility, Vatican I says:

But, even the Church itself by itself, because of its marvelous propagation, its exceptional holiness, and inexhaustible fruitfulness in all good works; because of its catholic unity and invincible stability, is a very great and perpetual motive of credibility, and an incontestable witness of its own divine mission.⁴

This motive of credibility, however, requires serious knowledge of history⁵ and the ability to distinguish the holiness of the Church from the sins and scandals of bad Catholics who, in their sin, act contrary to the Church's own teaching and supernatural life, and thus fail to manifest that supernatural life and origin.

The bad Christian, like the bad non-Christian, simply manifests the frailty of human freedom, the ability to resist God's grace, and the universal need for redemption. Thus the tragic phenomenon of sinful Christians admits of a purely human explanation. Sainly Christians, especially the canonized saints, on the other hand, are a motive of credibility because their holiness does not seem to admit of a purely human explanation.

The Witness of Miracles

Let us begin with miracles. When God revealed Himself to Moses, He attracted his attention by an evident miracle: a burning bush that was not consumed. When God then asked him to be His messenger to Pharaoh and the elders of Israel, Moses in turn asked for a miraculous sign by which his divine commission would be recognized:

Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The Lord

³ CCC 156. See Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*, ch. 3, DS 3009, 3013 (D 1790, 1794).

⁴ Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution concerning the Catholic Faith, chap. 3, Denz 1794.

⁵ See the famous line of Bl. John Henry Newman: "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant" (*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989], 8).

did not appear to you.” The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A rod.” And he said, “Cast it on the ground.” So he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. But the Lord said to Moses, “Put out your hand, and take it by the tail”—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand—“that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.”⁶

This witness of miracles was continually manifested by Moses in the succession of the ten plagues, in the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, in the column of fire and cloud that led the people, in the manna by which they were fed in the wilderness, in the water brought out from the rock by the rod of Moses, in the divine fire on Mt. Sinai, in the tablets of the Law written by the finger of God, in the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River, in the falling of the walls of Jericho, etc. Every step of the way of the Chosen People was marked by this witness of a power that could only come from God. Moses repeatedly reminds the Chosen People of these motives of credibility—the prodigious miracles by which God took them out of Egypt with a “mighty hand” and “outstretched arm.”⁷

When, centuries later, the Chosen People had fallen largely into the worship of Baal, Elijah used the same method. He challenged the prophets of Baal to demonstrate the truth of their religion by having fire descend from heaven to consume a sacrificial offering. Of course, they were unable to do this. Elijah then prepared an altar for sacrifice, doused it with water, and fire came down from heaven at his invocation to show that the worship of the God of Israel is the true religion:

And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that thou, O Lord, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back.” Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God.”⁸

The same witness of miracles is constantly given by Christ as proof that He is who He claims to be. When messengers came from John the Baptist in prison, asking Jesus if He was the one that Israel was awaiting, Jesus replied solely with the witness of His miracles (Mt 11:4–5): “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their

sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” Or again, He said to the people in Jerusalem on the feast of Chanukah (Jn 10:25, 37–38):

The works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness to me. . . . If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.

All of His great teachings were preceded by miracles to show the truth of what He said. For example, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes preceded His teaching on the Bread of Life in the synagogue in Capernaum. The raising of Lazarus shortly preceded His Paschal mystery, which was then confirmed by the miracle of the Resurrection, witnessed by the Apostles and more than five hundred of the disciples, as St. Paul tells us. The birth of the Church was confirmed by the miracle of Pentecost and the cures worked by the Apostles.

With regard to the witness of miracles, there is a perfect harmony between the Old and the New Testament, and indeed with the entire life of the Church in which miracles continue to exist in every age.

The Witness of Prophecy

Another fundamental witness of God’s Revelation is that it is accompanied by prophecy. Since God alone is omniscient, seeing the entire course of human history in His eternal present, God alone can foretell future events with certainty. If a prophet does so, it is a sign that God is speaking through him.

Moses speaks of this witness of prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:21–22:

And if you say in your heart, “How may we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?”—when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously.

It was through this witness of prophecy that the true prophets were distinguished from the false ones in ancient Israel. The true prophets were those whose prophecies were fulfilled in their proper time. The foretelling of the Babylonian captivity (and the earlier deportation of the ten northern tribes) was a great test for the truth of a prophet. For example, the prophet Jeremiah foretold the Babylonian captivity with precision, for which he had to suffer greatly at the hands of the rulers, lured on by false prophets. He even foretold the length of time that they would remain in Babylon: roughly seventy years. Isaiah also foretold the Exile and the return, even mentioning the name of the Persian king who would allow them to return to the Holy Land and rebuild the Temple: Cyrus (Is 45:1–5). The prophet Daniel made precise prophecies about the succession of Persian kings, followed by the conquest of

⁶ Ex 4:1–5.

⁷ See Deut 7:8. In Deut 29:1–5, before telling the Israelites of the punishments that would come upon them for infidelity, Moses calls to mind all the prodigies they witnessed.

⁸ 1 Kings 18:36–39.

Alexander, and the tribulations under Antiochus in the Maccabean period (Dan 11).

Unfortunately, not a few Biblical exegetes do not believe that all of these are true prophecies, supposing that they were written down after the events that they foretell (*vaticinium ex eventu*). I do not agree with such doubts, for such pseudo-prophecies written after the event would not have been accepted as true prophecies and accorded such veneration as the Word of God. However, there are two cases in which the supposition of *vaticinium ex eventu* is absolutely impossible: the coming of the Messiah and His Kingdom (the Church), for it is certain that the entirety of the Old Testament was written before the birth of Christ.

Hundreds of prophecies of the Messiah can be found in the Old Testament, spanning 2,000 years. Thus the greatest motive of credibility for the Old Testament is its prophecies of Christ, and the great motive of credibility in Christ is that His coming was foretold in so many marvelous ways. Again we see that the Old and New Testament witness forms an indestructible harmony, such that each reinforces the other.

Israel and the Church: Fulfillment of Prophecy

After Christ, the most important object of multiple prophecies is the Church. A striking prophecy is given in Daniel 2, in which king Nebuchadnezzar has a dream of a statue made out of four metals which is shattered by a stone not cut by human hands, which then grows to become a mountain that fills the whole earth.⁹ In his interpretation of the dream, Daniel says that the metals signify four world kingdoms, which are succeeded by a fifth world kingdom. The fact that this fifth kingdom grows out of a stone not cut by human hands signifies that its founder is God Himself. This fifth kingdom will not be temporal, like the other kingdoms, but will remain and grow without end:

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever; just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold.¹⁰

The Church realizes the prophecy of Daniel 2 in four ways. Unlike the temporal kingdoms that preceded it, the Church is of supernatural origin, founded by God made man on the rock of Peter and the other Apostles. Second, it is truly universal in scope. Although the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires were relatively universal, the Catholic Church is truly universal, existing in every continent and culture.

Third, the universality of the Church is something that is developing in time, as the stone not cut by human hands

gradually grew into a mountain filling the earth. The 2,000-year history of the Church is a history of gradual growth, in which losses sustained in one region are compensated for by the conversion of new cultures and nations. For example, while much of northern Europe was lost by the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, the Gospel was brought to the Americas, Africa, and the Orient.

Finally, as the supernatural kingdom in Nebuchadnezzar's dream was given a sovereignty that would never be destroyed, the Church has now withstood the ravages of time for twenty centuries, as she has watched nations rise and fall around her. Her adversaries have often deemed her doomed to extinction, but she has risen from each crisis stronger than before.

In the New Testament, the Church with her continuity and catholicity is most clearly foretold by Jesus in Matthew 16. Jesus had just asked the disciples to tell Him who people say that He is and who they themselves think that He is. Peter answers: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Christ goes on to tell Simon bar-Jonah who *he* is—he has now become *Cephas*, which is Aramaic for "rock," which in Greek is *Petros*, and *Petrus* in Latin. Hence our English "Peter": "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:18–19).

Here we have a magnificent prophecy that we can test today, almost two thousand years later. Is there still a kingdom on earth built on Peter, claiming the authority to bind and unbind in the name of Jesus Christ? Has it spread as leaven in the dough and as the mustard seed growing into a tree? Here we have the most astounding combination of prophecy and realization.

The Witness of the People of God

With regard to the witness of the miracles recorded in the Bible, many people object that they did not witness those miracles personally. However, we do see those miracles today *indirectly* through their effect in forming the People of God in the Old and New Testament: the synagogue and the Church. For the miracles of the Exodus and Mt. Sinai formed the very existence of the Jewish people, and in a sense have conserved their existence until today, in the most trying of circumstances, in which it seems that God is silent. Jews see the continued existence of the Jewish people and faith through so many centuries and in the midst of so many calamities, including that of a two-thousand year exile from their homeland, as a great sign of credibility in the truth of the Mosaic Revelation that formed that faith. A contemporary Jewish theologian, Michael Wyschogrod, states: "Above all, it seems to be an indestructible people. While all the peoples of the ancient world have long disap-

⁹ Dan 2:34–35.

¹⁰ Dan 2:44–45.

peared, the Jewish people continues to live and has lived for two thousand years without a homeland, dispersed over most of the globe.”¹¹ If those events of the Exodus did not truly occur, how can we explain the continuity of the faith of the Jewish people, and their continued vitality through so many centuries until today? They have maintained the same faith for well over three millennia!

In the same way, the miracles of Christ, His Resurrection, the miracle of Pentecost, and the miracles worked by the Apostles formed the Church and gave her a force of expansion in the most adverse circumstances of tremendous persecution for the first three centuries of her life.

Furthermore, in the New Covenant, the Church is a motive of credibility insofar as she appears with four marks that show a supernatural origin. We profess these four marks in the Creed: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The universal spread and continuity of the Catholic Church, which professes the same faith and exhibits the same sacramental form of government based on apostolic succession through twenty centuries is a kind of miracle visible to all generations, including our own. Both Israel and the Church are great motives of credibility for those who have eyes to see.

St. Augustine has a marvelous text on the credibility of the Resurrection of Christ based on the success of the apostolic preaching and the conversion of so much of the world to the Church:

And now we have three incredible things, all of which have come to pass. It is incredible that Jesus Christ should have risen in the flesh and ascended with flesh into heaven; it is incredible that the world should have believed so incredible a thing; it is incredible that a very few men, of mean birth and the lowest rank, and no education, should have been able so effectually to persuade the world, and even its learned men, of so incredible a thing. Of these three incredible things, the parties with whom we are debating refuse to believe the first; they cannot refuse to see the second, which they are unable to account for if they do not believe the third.¹²

Interestingly, the argument given here by St. Augustine, is accepted by an Orthodox Jew, Pinchas Lapide, who defends the historicity of the Resurrection of Christ against many contemporary Christian scholars! He writes:

I am completely convinced that the Twelve from Galilee, who were all farmers shepherds, and fishermen—there was not a single theology professor to be found among them—were totally unimpressed by scholarly theologoumena, as a Karl Rahner or Rudolf Bultmann write them. If they, through such a concrete historical event as the crucifixion, were so totally in despair and crushed, as all the four evangelists report to us, then no less concrete a historical event was needed

11 Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1983), 10.

12 *City of God*, bk. 22, chap. 5, transl. by Marcus Dods (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890); available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.XXII.5.html>.

in order to bring them out of the deep valley of their despair and within a short time to transform them into a community of salvation rejoicing to the high heavens.¹³

And again:

Thus, according to my opinion, the resurrection belongs to the category of the truly real and effective occurrences, *for without a fact of history there is no act of true faith*. A fact which indeed is withheld from objective science, photography . . . but not from the believing scrutiny of history. . . . In other words: *Without the Sinai experience—no Judaism; without the Easter experience—no Christianity*. Both were Jewish faith experiences whose radiating power, in a different way, was meant for the world of nations. For inscrutable reasons the resurrection faith of Golgotha was necessary in order to carry the message of Sinai into the world.¹⁴

The Sanctity of God’s Revelation as a Motive of Credibility

A fourth motive of credibility consists in the supernatural sanctity, nobility, and wisdom of God’s Revelation. If God speaks to mankind, this Revelation should be a supernatural wisdom above the wisdom of the world, but not in conflict with the voice of conscience that likewise comes from God. On the contrary, Revelation ought to be in perfect harmony with the secret dictates of conscience and the aspirations of the human heart.

This motive of credibility is frequent in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 4:5–8, Moses says to the people:

Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them; for that will be your *wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples*, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?¹⁵

The truth of God’s Revelation in the Old Testament is witnessed to by the human conscience, which finds the moral law announced in the Ten Commandments to be also that written upon the human heart.¹⁶

The supernatural wisdom of Revelation is also beautifully revealed in the theophany of the burning bush. We have seen that Moses asked for miracles to serve as motives of credibility for his mission. However, before asking for miracles, he first asks for the *name of God* to tell the elders

13 Pinchas Lapide and Jürgen Moltmann, *Jewish Montheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine: A Dialogue*, trans. Leonard Swidler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 60.

14 Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: a Jewish Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1983), p. 92 (my italics).

15 See also Ps 147:19–20.

16 See Rom 2:15; CCC 2070–71.

of Israel, so that they might believe that God is speaking through him. God responded: “I AM WHO AM.”¹⁷ It is surely extraordinary that God has revealed His name to Moses and the Jewish people of around 1400 BC in such a way that it coincides with the culmination of metaphysical insight about the nature of God: that God’s very essence is *TO BE*—BEING in all its fullness. God is *He who is: Being* by essence, whereas all other things *receive* being, or *have* being in limited ways through participation from God. God revealed Himself as the Lord of Being. He can give being to all other things because He is all perfection of being.

In the same way, the clear revelation of the oneness of God, and our resulting duty to love Him with all our heart, mind, and soul, is a marvelous sign of the supernatural wisdom of the Revelation to Israel. All devout Jews recite the text of Deuteronomy 6:4–5 morning and evening: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Human philosophy can understand that God is one, and it seems that Plato and Aristotle came to this insight. Nevertheless, that this should have been so clearly proclaimed almost a thousand years earlier, in the midst of a world utterly dominated by polytheism and in a people without any philosophical culture, is surely miraculous and a sign of a divine Revelation. This argument does not work with regard to Islam, for this teaching in the Qur’an is derivative from the Bible, and came at least eighteen centuries after it was revealed to Moses.

Like the ethos of the Old Testament, the moral and religious teaching of Jesus—as we find it in the Sermon on the Mount, for example—comes to us with the same divine claim to absolute authority, and the same nobility that touches the depths of the human conscience.

A corollary to this motive of credibility is that no supposedly revealed doctrine that is manifestly contrary to the dictates of conscience and natural reason can possibly be God’s true Revelation. A religion that proclaims the use of violence in the establishment of religion or the licitness of polygamy is by that very fact shown not to be from God.¹⁸

Benedict XVI was very brave to speak about this in his well-known Regensburg lecture, when he cited the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus (1391), who said: “Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.” Benedict goes on to comment:

¹⁷ Ex 3:13–15.

¹⁸ It is one thing for polygamy to be tolerated for a time in a certain society, as was the case in the early history of Israel, and quite another thing for it to be formally approved as licit and good, as is the case in Mormonism and Islam.

The emperor, after having expressed himself so forcefully, goes on to explain in detail the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. “God,” he says, “is not pleased by blood—and not acting reasonably (*συν λόγῳ*) is contrary to God’s nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats. . . . To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death.”¹⁹

The Beauty of Christ and the Saints

The sanctity of God’s Revelation culminates in Christ Himself as He is encountered in the Gospels. Nowhere is this more apparent than in His Passion, for those who have the eyes to see it.

In a secondary way, the witness of the saints as their lives are transformed through their encounter with Christ serves as motive of credibility. Cardinal Ratzinger spoke of this in 2002:

I have often affirmed my conviction that the true apology of Christian faith, the most convincing demonstration of its truth against every denial, are the saints and the beauty that the faith has generated. Today, for faith to grow, we must lead ourselves and the persons we meet to encounter the saints and to enter into contact with the Beautiful.²⁰

Although more difficult to verify objectively than the other three principal motives of credibility, this reason for belief based on the sanctity of the teaching is no less important in practice. However, it cannot stand alone, for the human mind could easily be mistaken in its judgment of the supernatural wisdom and holiness of doctrine, which is immeasurably above its own level. Thus it is important that all four of these motives of credibility always go together: miracles, prophecy, the witness of the Church (People of God), and the supernatural wisdom and holiness of the doctrine revealed.²¹

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, Regensburg Lecture of Sept. 12, 2006.

²⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, “The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty.” Message Of His Eminence Card. Joseph Ratzinger to the Communion and Liberation Meeting at Rimini (24–30 August 2002). Available online at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020824_ratzinger-cl-rimini_en.html. Accessed Jan. 27, 2013.

²¹ For a good exposition of the motives of credibility, see, among others, Bl. Pius IX, encyclical *Qui pluribus* (*On Faith and Reason*, 1846), DS 2779–80 (D 1638–39): “But how many wonderful and shining proofs are ready at hand to convince the human reason in the clearest way that the religion of Christ is divine and that ‘the whole principle of our doctrines has taken root from the Lord of the heavens above’; therefore nothing exists more definite, more settled or more holy than our faith, which rests on the strongest foundations. This faith, which teaches for life and points towards salvation, which casts out all vices and is the fruitful mother and nurse of the virtues, has been established by the birth, life, death, resurrection, wisdom, wonders

St. Thomas Aquinas on the Motives of Credibility

St. Thomas treats the motives of credibility in an interesting (and politically incorrect) article from the *Summa contra Gentiles* on the reasonability of the Catholic faith in comparison with Islam. He begins by stating that since God has willed to reveal Himself, it is fitting for the divine Wisdom to manifest that Revelation through works that only God can do, such as different kinds of miracles:

For these “secrets of divine Wisdom” (Job 11:6) the divine Wisdom itself, which knows all things to the full, has deigned to reveal to men. . . . In order to confirm those truths that exceed natural knowledge, it gives visible manifestation to works that surpass the ability of all nature. Thus, there are the wonderful cures of illnesses, there is the raising of the dead, . . . and what is more wonderful, there is the inspiration given to human minds, so that simple and untutored persons, filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, come to possess instantaneously the highest wisdom and the readiest eloquence.

Secondly, St. Thomas observes that mass conversions to Christianity, especially in the early Church, were largely motivated by these miracles, as witnessed to in the Acts of the Apostles. He also cites Hebrews 2:4, which mentions the miracles that confirmed the Gospel: “God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will.”

Such mass conversions, however, were more remarkable for four reasons. First, they took place in the midst of a terrible persecution lasting 250 years. Second, the Christian faith teaches supernatural mysteries exceeding the power of reason, such as the Trinity, the Incarnation and Passion, and grace. The human mind naturally resists what

and prophecies of Christ Jesus, its divine author and perfecter! Shining forth in all directions with the light of teaching from on high and enriched with the treasures of heavenly wealth, this faith grew famed and notable by the fore-tellings of so many prophets, the lustre of so many miracles, the steadfastness of so many martyrs, and the glory of so many saints! It made known the saving laws of Christ and, gaining in strength daily even when it was most cruelly persecuted, it made its way over the whole world by land and sea, from the sun’s rising to its setting, under the single standard of the Cross! The deceit of idols was cast down and the mist of errors was scattered. By the defeat of all kinds of enemies, this faith enlightened with divine knowledge all peoples, races and nations, no matter how barbarous and savage, or how different in character, morals, laws and ways of life. It brought them under the sweet yoke of Christ Himself by proclaiming peace and good tidings to all men!

“Now, surely all these events shine with such divine wisdom and power that anyone who considers them will easily understand that the Christian faith is the work of God. Human reason knows clearly from these striking and certain proofs that God is the author of this faith; therefore it is unable to advance further but should offer all obedience to this faith, casting aside completely every problem and hesitation. Human reason is convinced that it is God who has given everything the faith proposes to men for belief and behavior.”

transcends its own powers. Third, Christianity teaches a high moral code, especially regarding marriage and the transmission of life. Fourth, Christian hope promises a supernatural beatitude—seeing God face to face with the eyes of the mind—rather than sensual pleasures.

When these arguments were examined, through the efficacy of the abovementioned proof, and not the violent assault of arms or the promise of pleasure, and (what is most wonderful of all) in the midst of the tyranny of the persecutors, an innumerable throng of people, both simple and most learned, flocked to the Christian faith. In this faith there are truths preached that surpass every human intellect; the pleasures of the flesh are curbed; it is taught that the things of the world should be spurned. Now, for the minds of mortal men to assent to these things is the greatest of miracles, just as it is a manifest work of divine inspiration that, spurning visible things, men should seek only what is invisible.²²

The spread of the Catholic faith, given these adverse conditions, and its resulting universality, continuity, and holiness, built on the Apostolic foundation, make the Catholic Church the most important miracle of all after the Resurrection of Christ. Before the expansion of the Church in the time of the Apostles, God worked many miracles to further its spread. Today these miraculous works are less necessary, at least where the Church is well established, because there all can see the Church that continues through the centuries as a perpetual miracle. This means that the past miracles in some sense continue to be visible in the Catholic Church, in that her very presence today as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, is only explicable as a result of innumerable miracles throughout her history. Hence St. Thomas says: “This wonderful conversion of the world to the Christian faith is the clearest witness of the signs given in the past; so that it is not necessary that they should be further repeated, since they appear most clearly in their effect.”²³

To show the force of the Church with her four marks as a motive of credibility, St. Thomas makes an argument in the form of a dilemma (forcing a choice between two difficult options): either the Church spread through many miracles, or she spread without miracles. We believe that the former option is true. However, even if the second option were true, it would be no less miraculous. In whichever way one resolves the dilemma, the spread of the Church involves miracle and is thus a motive of credibility. St. Thomas says:

For it would be truly more wonderful than all signs if the world had been led by simple and humble men to believe such lofty truths, to accomplish such difficult actions, and to have such high hopes. Yet it is also a fact that, even in our own time, God does not cease to work miracles through His

22 SCG I, ch. 6, n. 1, trans. Anton C. Pegis, in *Summa contra Gentiles. Book One: God*, 71–72.

23 Ibid., n. 3, p. 72.

saints for the confirmation of the faith.²⁴

Miracles are not as necessary in the mature age of the Church as they were in her infancy, but God still acts wonderfully in every generation in order to confirm and strengthen His followers, especially when the Church spreads to new regions. The apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City in 1531 and the resulting conversion of some ten million native Americans is the most remarkable example. This divine action continues in the miracles required for the canonization of saints, or in the miracles of places like Lourdes and Fatima.

But what signs can be alleged by the followers of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Buddhists, or Muslims? With regard to Muhammad, St. Thomas says:

He did not bring forth any signs produced in a supernatural way, which alone fittingly gives witness to divine inspiration; for a visible action that can be only divine reveals an invisibly inspired teacher of truth. On the contrary, Muhammad said that he was sent in the power of his arms—which are signs not lacking even to robbers and tyrants. . . . Nor do divine pronouncements on the part of preceding prophets offer him any witness. . . . It is thus clear that those who place any faith in his words believe foolishly.²⁵

This does not mean that Muslims or members of other religions do not believe *sincerely*, for of course they do. At issue here are objective motives for belief. St. Thomas is arguing that Islam does not have the same motives of credibility as does the Catholic faith, for it lacks the argument from miracles and prophecy, as well as the four marks of the Church. Nor is the spread of Islam a motive of credibility, for it took place not under persecution but through the aid of the sword. Often Muslims put forth the beauty of the Quran as a motive of credibility. This is insufficient, however, for the beauty of religious texts is not in itself miraculous, and is not a sufficient sign of divine Revelation. Man is a religious animal and gifted with a connatural religious and poetic sense.

The motives of credibility are useful not only to distinguish Christianity from other religions, but can also be used to orient and illuminate the comparison between the Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church. Christ presented powerful motives of credibility before instituting the Church and substantially changing the religious worship of Israel; but the Protestant revolutionaries did not present any such motives of credibility for the changes in Church authority and worship that they introduced. The meek and gentle St. Francis of Sales, who converted some seventy-two thousand Calvinists back to the Catholic faith, rebuked them for believing their ministers (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin) who opposed the Church and changed doctrine without being supported by prophecies or miracles:

Your ministers have not been prophesied as preachers of the word of God, nor the time of their coming, nor a single one of their actions. They have made a revolution in the Church much greater and bolder than Our Lord made in the synagogue; for they have taken all away, only putting back certain shadows: but testimonies to this effect have they none. . . . Whence will they show me that the Church was ever to receive another form, or a like reformation to the one which our Lord made?²⁶

Instead of these signs, Protestantism generally justified its extraordinary mission from God by its success, and by the interior witness of the Holy Spirit inspiring the reformers. However, the successful spread of Protestantism was not based on the continuity, unity, and universality of its organization and teaching. The result of the Protestant Reformation was rather the *multiplication* of churches and sects divided one from another in doctrine, numbering somewhere in the range of 20,000. Fragmentation and division are not miraculous signs, but the natural tendency of human institutions left to themselves (especially when governed by the principle of private interpretation of Scripture and dogma). These effects of Protestantism do not need to be explained by a divine cause!²⁷

What is miraculous is rather the internal unity of the Catholic Church in communion with the Roman Pontiff through twenty centuries, surviving great crises and historical vicissitudes, and yet always preserving the same faith. Why did the Catholic Church not go the way of the Protestant denominations? What maintains its unity, catholicity, apostolicity, and holiness? It is evidently the rock of Peter, the papacy, on which Christ founded the Church (Mt 16:18). Catholics see this foundation—and the four marks that rest on it—as a sure sign of the divine origin of the Church.

Although the Protestant world lost the marks of unity, catholicity, and apostolicity (understood as apostolic succession), holiness in the Protestant world still remains as a motive of credibility. This holiness, however, as Protestants would agree, comes from the gifts they received from the Church (and share with the Catholic Church today): Scripture, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the Nicene Creed, and so forth. This holiness thus points to its source in the Catholic Church, and should impel to Catholic unity.²⁸

²⁴ St. Francis de Sales, *The Catholic Controversy* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1989), part 1, ch. 4, p. 27.

²⁷ The holiness in the Protestant world still remains as a motive of credibility. This holiness, however, as Protestants would agree, comes from the gifts they received from the Church and share with the Catholic Church today: Scripture, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the Nicene Creed, and so forth.

²⁸ See *Lumen gentium* 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 3, pp. 72–73.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 4, pp. 73–74.