

## REVELATION: INITIAL AND ORIGINAL FOUNDATION OF THE THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION.

The evolution of the concept of revelation belongs to the history of the understanding that Christianity has had of itself. It must be underlined, on one hand, that the awareness of the importance and centrality of the category of revelation by the ecclesial and theological reflection grows at the thresholds of Vatican Council I (1869-1870), in a historical moment rich in cultural and political changes, even if crossed by a difficulty of dialogue between the knowledge of faith and the knowledge of reason; on the other hand, the theological reflection since its beginnings has tried to underline the novelty of Christianity through the concept of revelation that will become central in the innovative intuitions of the II Vatican Council (1962-1965). A datum, however, must be set in prominence: revelation sets a space for meaning accessible to every man, because it makes available the permanent truth of the event Jesus Christ and of the religious relationship with God founded upon it.

### 1. REVELATION AS SALVATION AND KNOWLEDGE

As a point of departure for a historical look on the matter of revelation, it is opportune to underline that “the Christian writers of the first centuries didn’t deal with revelation as a problem; on the contrary they considered it as an obvious datum and therefore not in need to be proven. In spite of some criticism on this or on that point, in the ancient times the reality of the divine manifestations is not set in doubt. The man of ancient times didn’t experience the divine as transcendence, but in continuous revelations.”<sup>1</sup>

In the light of this consideration, the epoch of the **Fathers of the Church** affirms that revelation is perceived in connection with the history of salvation, that finds the culminating point in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, as Tertullian writes († c. 220): “Instead our God didn’t reveal himself since the beginning, he didn’t reveal himself through creation, but through himself in Jesus Christ” (*Adversus Marcionem* I 19, 1). The meeting between the Word and the vital horizon of human history produces that space in which revelation sends forth its pedagogy and allows man to meet with the universal *Logos* that is identified with Jesus. The why of this concentration on the figure of Jesus is given by the necessity to show and to legitimate the definitiveness and the oneness of the revelation brought in Christ, at least for two reasons: from one side, to show the difference between the Christian God and the God of the Greek philosophy whose presence in the natural order of the world didn’t demand any particular revelation; from the other side, to operate a criticism to the pretension of the *gnosi*. Particularly, the Gnostic systems pretended to consider as revelation their way of intending salvation, characterized by an illumination from on high that was pointing to a spiritual knowledge and to the devaluation of Jesus the man in favour of the Christ. The answer by the apologetic theology was committed to show the possibility to reconcile the transcendence of God with its revelation in history that meant at the same time the possibility to know God. In such context some symbolic theological figures stand out.

*Justin* († c. 165) in contact with the Greek philosophy affirms: “Our doctrine is above any human doctrine, because we have received the whole Word in Christ who appeared to us body, word and soul. All the correct principles that philosophers and legislators have discovered and expressed were founded and partially contemplated in the Word” (*II Apologia*, X, 1-3). More important was the theological reflection of *Ireneus of Lion* († c. 202) who had to face the danger of the Gnostic temptation which sustained a plurality of particular revelations from teachers and wise men, against the revealing centrality of Christ. The accent was set on the horizon of the history of

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<sup>1</sup> P. Stockmeier, «Rivelazione» nella chiesa cristiana delle origini, in M. Seybold – H. Waldenfels (edd.), La rivelazione, a cura di G. Ruggieri, Edizioni «Augustinus», Palermo 1992, p.47.

salvation that finds its fullness in Christ and that gives meaning to the historical saving events. “The Word of the Father knows his Father, for us invisible and not knowable, and he speaks to us of the ineffable one; in turn the Father alone knows his Word. All this has been taught to us by the Lord. Therefore the Son reveals the knowledge of his Father through his manifestation. The knowledge of his Father is in fact the Son’s revelation, that is, all things are manifested through the Word” (*Adversus haereses* IV 6, 3).

A mention, finally, to the period of Scholasticism (VI-XIV cent.) whose characteristic was the attention set by the theological reflection in confronting revelation with the other learnings. In such optics, revelation assumes an important role from the point of view of knowledge: it constitutes a real *itinerary of the mind toward God* that offers first the truth to man so that he might enter the experience of salvation and become aware of his supernatural destination. For this reason, revelation is necessary in as much as it communicates some truths otherwise inaccessible to man, as S. Thomas Aquinas underlines over and over. (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q.1, 1; II-II, q.2,6c).

## 2 THE CRITICISM OF REVELATION AND RELIGION ACCORDING TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Without a shade of a doubt, it is with modernity that a fracture is operated with the preceding tradition represented by the Christian vision of life, a fracture symbolically expressed in the conception of the Enlightenment by which man is both interpreter and responsible of the way of seeing and living reality. The answer to the question: *what is the Enlightenment?* By the philosopher I. Kant (1724-1804) is emblematic: “The Enlightenment is the exit of man from a condition of non-age of which he has been responsible. Non-age is the incapability to use ones own intellect without the guide of others. The responsibility of such non-age must be attributed to man himself, when its cause doesn't reside in a lack of intellect, but it depends on the lack of determination and courage in using it, without the guide of others. «*Sapere aude!* ». «Dare to use your own intellect! ». This is the motto of the Enlightenment.”<sup>2</sup>

The criticism of the enlightenment brings about a change of paradigms and models of interpretation of reality that provokes a different way of understanding Christian religion itself. First of all a vision of life based on the greatness and infinity of the universe is put into crisis, because it is an eloquent sign of the existence of a Being that governs the threads of history. The attention is turned to the centrality of man, to his ability to be the protagonist of the transformation of his life, through the acquisition of scientific theories that try to define a new order of nature, without any appeal to explanations extraneous to reason. Secondly, the idea of the strength of reason that holds the conditions of possibility to free man from a situation of non-age takes the upper hand, since it is fit to build a society no more marked by the weight of a tradition incapable of real progress. The idea that certain historical truths cannot pretend to have a universal value, that is, to be valid for everybody, follows. But, and this is the most indicative aspect, it is affirmed that it is not necessary to resort to a religion beyond the demands of reason; a religion, that is, that be a *natural revelation*, the base of any other supernatural revelation that, by itself, doesn't contain nothing more in comparison to the revelation present in the spirit of man. With a clarification: that the Bible and the Christian tradition represent the complete transmission of that theological knowledge that is present within the limits of reason.

It is in the context of this claim of the autonomy of reason that the long and swinging critical season towards Christianity and its pretension to be a revealed religion<sup>3</sup>, will cross western Europe, especially England, France and Germany. E. Herbert of Cherbury (1648) writes a decisive work by the title *Sulla verità e sulla sua distinzione dalla rivelazione, dal verosimile, dal possibile e dal*

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<sup>2</sup> I. Kant, *Risposta alla domanda che cos'è illuminismo?*, in *Che cos'è illuminismo? I testi e la genealogia del concetto*, a cura di A. Tagliapietra, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 1997, pp. 16-18.

<sup>3</sup> On this topic go back to C. Dotolo, *La teologia fondamentale davanti alle sfide del «pensiero debole» di G. Vattimo*, LAS, Roma 1999, pp. 109-158.

*falso* (= *De veritate, prout distinguitur a revelatione, a verisimili, a possibili et a falso*, Londra 1645), in which he sustains that a religion is such if it is accessible to reason, as he affirms that God can be known through the natural instinct. Therefore, Christianity (and the other religions) that introduce themselves as revelation cannot be in contrast with the notions of reason, which is God's gift. Following what is already been said, some works that interpret the awareness of the rationality of the natural revelation expressed by Christianity prove to be emblematic. Works like: *Cristianesimo senza misteri* (1696) By J. Toland; *Il cristianesimo antico come la creazione o Il vangelo come riedizione della religione naturale* (1730) of M. Tindal<sup>4</sup>, are a premise to a philosophical and theological season more articulated that has defined revealed Christianity as the historical expression of the religiousness of reason.

The reflection by G. E. Lessing (1729-1781), for instance, underlines that the revealed religion is non other than the religion of reason; it belongs to the essence of man himself. Christianity doesn't do anything other than to correspond to the practical demands of man, those demands that refer to the orientation of the theory over the praxis. The superiority of Christianity in comparison to the other religions is really in the essentiality of its educational task, also because it answers to a criterion expressed in the fragment *Sulla genesi della religione rivelata* § 11: “The best revealed or positive religion is the one that contains less conventional additions to the natural religion, and limits less the good effects of this last one.” Likewise, the future of Christianity will be tied up to its ability to favour the human emancipation in defending the role of reason of which revelation is historically anticipation. In *L'Educazione del genere umano* Lessing writes: “§ 1: What education is for the single man, revelation is for the whole human kind. § 2: Education is a revelation imparted to the single one; revelation is an education that has concerned mankind and still concerns it. § 4: Education doesn't give man anything that he could not also draw by himself; but what he could draw by himself, revelation offers him with greater rapidity and facility. In the same way revelation doesn't give to mankind any thing which the human reason could not reach with its own strength; it, has only offered, and it offers to humanity the most important of these things with a good advance.”<sup>5</sup>

But it is with I. Kant (1724-1804) and J.G. Fichte (1762-1814) that the criticism of the enlightenment to the concept of revelation culminates. In his work *La religione nei limiti della semplice ragione* (1793) I. Kant doesn't intend to deduce religion from *reason alone*, independently from the historical revelation, but to analyze how much of Christianity, held as revealed religion, could also be recognized through the reason alone. Faced with the risk of wanting to outline an ideal religion, his reflection has to reckon with a historical religion able to offer man the possibility to perceive a reality that theoretically goes beyond the historical data. In such sense the revealing dimension of Christianity constitutes for I. Kant the expression of how revelation, in particular grace and miracles, offer not only a completion to the insufficiencies of reason, but imposes itself as the element proper to religion to which reason, especially (but not only) the moral one, refers to for satisfying the ethical demands. For this reason, the German philosopher points out an idea of reason that he calls *reflecting faith* able to conduct the same reason to the acceptance of the transcendent ideas.

On the base of such a perspective, J.G. Fichte in the Essay *Saggio di una critica di ogni rivelazione* (written in 1791 and published anonymous the following year) sets the central question: “The concept of revelation is therefore a concept of an effect produced by God in the sensible world through a supernatural causality, through which effect God announces himself as moral legislator. Thus the question arises: is this concept possible *a priori* or is it simply of empirical origin?”<sup>6</sup> The solution is in the fact that the natural revelation is the condition for deducing the supernatural concept of revelation, in as much as the revelation external to man cannot be in contrast when

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. C. Dotolo, *sub voce*, in *LEXICON. Dizionario dei Teologi*, a cura di L. Pacomio – G. Occhipinti, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1998, pp. 657; 1237; 1238-1239.

<sup>5</sup> G. E. Lessing, *La religione dell'umanità*, a cura di N. Merker, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1991, pp. 41; 130.

<sup>6</sup> J. G. Fichte, *Saggio di una critica di ogni rivelazione*, a cura di M. M. Olivetti, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1998, p. 33.

compared with the inward revelation. Therefore, if the fact of revelation can be accepted it is because it discloses the structure of man and of his finite conscience, marked by the ineffable otherness of the Absolute.

The sketchy plan we made of the fact that characterizes the season of criticism by the enlightenment about revelation, gives way to some considerations that are pointing out the centrality of such category, to the point that this period is seen as the crossing from *a philosophy of religion to the philosophy of revelation*. There is no doubt that the suggestion offered by the criticism on revelation is motivated not only from an attention, perhaps exaggerated, to the human reason, but also to a concept of revelation tied up to an exclusively *theoretical-instructive* model: revelation appears, in other terms as the content of supernatural truths, together with propositions that must be held true since are an act of the divine communication. Under such motivations, the indication comes to think of revelation as a *historical content*, as a totality of events pointing out the process of self manifestation of God. Beginning from the meaningful work of the theologian and philosopher F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Discorsi sulla religione* (1799), there is the conviction that religion cannot be natural, but only revealed. It is considered as the historical answer given by man's intuition about the Absolute and the Infinite. It is from these presuppositions that G. W. F. Hegel defines revelation as the self revelation of God. God manifests himself to the human conscience and makes it participates of his being. This idea will assume a determining role in the theology of the XIX century. As a consequence Christianity, in virtue of the truths of which it is testimony, it is the absolute religion that implicates even the oneness of revelation and that, therefore, and it becomes the object of an unavoidable confrontation with the philosophical reflection.

But it is above all F. W. J... Schelling (1775-1854) that with the *Filosofia della rivelazione* (published posthumous in 1858) confirms the historical content of Christianity which, however, expresses a historicity with a *universal* character. In such sense, if Christian revelation interests the philosophy it is because it proposes some contents that go beyond the simple reason. "If Revelation would contain only the contents of reason, it would not be of any interest; its specific interest can consist only in the circumstance that it contains something that goes beyond reason, that is more than what reason contains [...]; if therefore Revelation is such, it will have to merge, if it is possible for it to merge, only in a higher historical synthesis, that is in a synthesis that goes beyond Revelation itself; and Christianity as a special phenomenon, will have to merge toward something that is different from what it is usually in front of our eyes."<sup>7</sup> When faced by this difference, reason is called to an *amazement* able to welcome revelation as its own object.

The other consideration to be underlined in the critical accentuation, sometimes exasperated, by the Enlightenment, is the presence of an attention to the destiny of humanity and the desire to meet the *true religion* able to allow man to reach his identity and to make possible the ethical construction of a better world, pervaded by the ideal of liberty, equality and brotherhood. It doesn't surprise, therefore, the fact that the century of the Enlightenment did concerned itself with the search of what is specific about religion<sup>8</sup>.

The theological *apologetic* reflection whose task is to justify the faith in revelation (cfr. 1Pt 3, 15) begins to assume a certain expression in this panorama rich in proposals and variegated in its perspectives. It is not by chance, that in the atmosphere of the enlightenment the setting up of the apologetic frame-work of theology takes form. This is indicatively shown by the work by L. J. Hooke (1716-1796), *Religione naturale e principi rivelati (Religioni naturalis et revelatae principia*, 1752), which will constitute the classical form of the discipline that later will be called *fundamental theology*. The basic idea is the possibility to offer a three way *demonstration*: the *religious* demonstration, aiming to affirm the objective value of religion, whose natural truths represent the way of access to the reception of the true religion; the *Christian* demonstration, which finds in the originality of Christianity as revealed religion its particularity and oneness in the

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<sup>7</sup> F. W. J.. Schelling, *Filosofia della rivelazione*, a cura di A. Bausola, Milano, Rusconi 1997, pp. 235-237.

<sup>8</sup> See also the reflections by G. Moretto, *Filosofia e religione nell'età di Goethe*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1997.

panorama of the other religions; the *Catholic* demonstration, that points out in the Church the historical-mystery way for meeting the saving content of Christianity. Beyond the price to be paid to the polemic context that often brought the theological reflection on the defensive, the demand for an answer on matters decisive for the truth of man, for a coherent presentation of the Christian novelty, for the need of a dialogue able to provoke questions from those who didn't share or didn't know the specific Christian religion, is at the base of the apologetic that has lived intense moments and seasons of rethinking. This was done with a double conviction: the necessity for the faith to enter deeply in the culture and in the wheel of history; the awareness that revelation is a true and sensible offer to the interpretation of the human existence, and it demands attention to the recipient. It is in this optics that revelation will acquire more and more a character that *qualifies* the content of the Christian faith; that *legitimizes* it because it makes reference to the transcendent base of its historical content; that is *apologetic*, by reason of the truth shown and proposed in the theological reflection and in the ecclesial praxis.

### 3. THE CREDIBILITY OF REVELATION: VATICAN COUNCIL I

The historical and ecclesial context was sufficiently ready to consider and to re-phrase the theological concept of revelation, not only for the pressure the rights of reason were claiming in regard to the demand of revelation, but also for the difficulty, coming from the theological reflection, to show the reasonableness and the credibility of revelation in order to a shared criterion of truth. The reflection by the theologians and by the Magisterium started, consequently, a process of explanation of what is specific of revelation, also against the risks of making a rational vision of Christianity an absolute truth. It must be remembered, however, that already the Council of Trent, through the term *Gospel*, wanted to operate a doctrinal precise statement about the saving truths that man should know, giving a start, in a certain sense, to that theoretical-instructive model of revelation that is still present in the essential formulations of the Vatican Council I. Nevertheless, the attention of the Council reflection was set more on the intention to show the *credibility* of revelation that on the fact of revelation itself, insisting on the importance of the *answer of the faith* from man<sup>9</sup>. The dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius*, (April 24 1870)<sup>10</sup> particularly offers a first formulation on what is specific of revelation, that cannot be considered as something for ever present in the horizon of the human thought.

The point of departure is the affirmation of the principle of the ability to know God. In the reality of the world and life, man has the possibility to know God, even if such possibility seems to have being fulfilled in an incomplete way. It is true that the natural revelation points out in man, as image of God, the condition to perceive God. Nevertheless, it doesn't seem able to make up for to the historical insufficiency of reason to leave space to the meeting with God, to open oneself to the wonder of reality rich in symbols and figures that call the same reason to go beyond itself. Only a free initiative of God, distinct from the natural revelation, could reopen man's way of understanding. "It pleased God in his wisdom and goodness to reveal himself and his eternal decrees to mankind through another supernatural way" (DS 3004). It is really the accent on *another way* that shows the novelty pointed out by the *Dei Filius*: revelation is, in conclusion, a self-revelation, an initiative that, departing from God, shows the origin of its message whose contents are by themselves unattainable from man and, in fact, they go beyond its natural abilities. In such sense, revelation is beyond the control of reason and qualitatively different in comparison to the

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. what is written by R. Fisichella, *Atto di fede: Dei Verbum ripete Dei Filius?*, in ID. (ed.), *La Teologia Fondamentale. Convergenze per il terzo millennio*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1997, pp. 105-124. see also for a wider reading C. Theobald, *La Costituzione dogmatica Dei Filius del Concilio Vaticano I*, in B. Sesboüé (ed.), *Storia dei Dogmi IV. La Parola della Salvezza*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1998, pp. 230-276.

<sup>10</sup> For the text of the Council document cf. H. Denzinger – A. Schönmetzer. *Enchiridion symbolorum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, Fribourg-Roma 1976. (From now on DS).

natural religion. It is “revealed truth” (DS 3002) that, in involving man and directing its natural desire to see God, shows him what has to be known and his supernatural destination.

“Vatican I has formulated the proposition «that God can be known with certainty as the beginning and the end of all things with the natural light of the human reason, starting from the created things» (DS 3004), but the same document surrounded the proposition with prudential clauses. Only when God calls us personally by his revelation of grace and word, it becomes possible that «what pertains to God and that by itself would be inaccessible to the human reason in the concrete historical situation of humanity, can be recognized easily by all, with certainty and without errors» (DS 3005). With the «it can» (*posse*) of the first declaration only a real possibility is expressed, that is: *the horizon of the human spirit as far as knowledge and will are concerned is very open to formally include the fact of having been created, and with it the idea of the creator; but nevertheless this open horizon on God can materially be upset by insufficient and wrong ideals advancing the pretension of absoluteness.*”<sup>11</sup>

The physiognomy of revelation so delineated, defines the faith as recognition of the authority of God in the revealed truth. To believe is to hold as true what God reveals in an infallible way: “there cannot be true opposition between faith and human reason, because it is the same God who infuses the light of reason in man and reveals the mysteries of faith [...]; therefore there can be no contradiction between the truths of reason and the revealed truths” (DS 3017. 3041). To confirm such reality, revelation appears with a perceivable objectivity through “most certain signs” (DS 3009): the miracles, the prophecies, the existence of the Church are expressions of the fact that revelation is believable, worthy to be held instructive for the human existence. The *theoretical-instructive* model of revelation in Vatican I is meeting with the importance to show its credibility for every man. In it the truths to be known about God are definitely fixed “with a firm certainty and without possibility of error” (DS 3005).

The interpretative path, however, concentrated itself, in a substantial way, on the necessity to specify, to define, to formulate with rigor the contents of revelation, setting in shade the very dynamism of revelation that happens between God and man in history. Above all the centrality of the Christological revelation in its totality was left on the fringes of the reflection. Only with Vatican Council II the fruits of a long reflection that has crossed the whole theological search of the twentieth century will be gathered.

#### 4. REVELATION IN THE NOVELTY COMMUNICATED BY JESUS CHRIST: THE II VATICAN COUNCIL

Vatican Council II opens a fertile season of rethinking on the identity of Christianity, and it is done by rethinking those categories that constitute the specific of Christianity. Among these, surely must be named the revelation category that represents the crucial point of the Council constitution *Dei Verbum*, promulgated November 18th 1965<sup>12</sup> after a long *iter*. The *Dei Verbum* was prepared giving great attention to the centrality of the Bible and the Word of God. It offers some decisive elements that are organized around the *relational concept* of revelation. Revelation considered as event of salvation, is *self-communication* and *self-manifestation* of God to man in history, and man is invited to live the experience of a personal unprecedented encounter, because God “addresses men as his friends and moves among them in order to invite and receive them into his company” (n. 2). What are, therefore, the main points?

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<sup>11</sup> H. U. von Balthasar, *Il movimento verso Dio*, in ID., *Spiritus Creator. Saggi teologici* III, Morcelliana, Brescia 1972, pp. 30-31.

<sup>12</sup> See B. Sesboüé, *La comunicazione della Parola di Dio: Dei Verbum*, in ID (ed.), *Storia dei Dogmi* IV, pp. 449-491. Cfr. N. Ciola (ed.), *La «Dei Verbum» trent'anni dopo*. Miscellanea in onore di Padre Umberto Betti o.f.m., in *Lateranum* 61 (1995).

a) The central and upsetting event of the revelation of God is found in the *history of Jesus Christ*. Jesus Christ not only shows God's intervention in the human history, but he offers a unique meaning to the saving project of his Father. Here *the serious case of revelation* is laid: Jesus is the Word made flesh, that catches unprepared the human language and even the way of thinking of God. For this reason, the story of Jesus Christ is the unheard of and inconceivable story by which God goes in search of man: in the measure in which the presence of Jesus Christ is seen as an event that cannot be confined within preordained schemes, no border is insurmountable, every system of interpretation doesn't result definitive any more, no mystery is inexpressible, no man is prisoner of unresolved problems and, at times, of an absurd finitude. Rather, man meets, in the Christological revelation, the whole fullness of revelation, which is the criterion and horizon for the understanding of his own vocation. Some affirmations of the *Gaudium et Spes* are strongly evocative: "Every man remains a question to himself, one that is dimly perceived and left unanswered. For there are times, especially in the major events of life, when no man can altogether escape from such self-questioning. God alone, who calls man to deeper thought and more humble probing, can fully and with complete certainty supply an answer to this questioning (n. 21)". "In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (n. 22). "Since the Church is entrusted with the task of opening up to man the mystery of God, who is the last end of man, in doing so it opens up to him the meaning of his own existence" (n.41).

b) In such optics, revelation results to be a dramatic story: with appeals and interventions of God and acceptances and refusals from man, its project is finalized to reconstruct humanity's identity and to constitute it *partner* in the dialogue with God. Revelation gives to the religious experience the meaning of a dialogue of love that places man in front of a decisive intersection: to choose life, whose secret is marked by the quality of communion with God; or to choose the path of a self-sufficiency that holds itself capable of living without God, a God that presents himself in the concreteness of a love story. This is the motive for which revelation constitutes the unique and opportune time to let the days flow towards salvation. Revelation makes the history of salvation to become the history in the every day stories, in which the events and the words are not simply containers of facts and hypothesis on the meaning of life but expressions of the inexhaustible creativeness of God that calls man to be an attentive interpreter. The *Dei Verbum* in fact, speaks of an *economy* (n.4) of revelation that prefigures, in Jesus Christ, the path to which man is invited in order to meet with God. But, at the same time, it underlines that in Jesus revelation finds its fullness.

c) Nevertheless, revelation remains a *mystery* in front of which the answer of man cannot be reduced simply to a conclusion by reasoning or to the adhesion to an evidence that doesn't leave alternatives; it can only be an answer of faith, an answer that is submission: "the obedience of faith must be given to God as he reveals himself. By faith man freely commits his entire self to God making the full submission of his intellect and will to God who reveals, and willingly assenting to the revelation given by Him" (n. 5). The search of truth and meaning founded in Jesus Christ, *sacrament* of the encounter between God and man is for the believer a real possibility. Faith, therefore, can only be understood in relationship to revelation, without which it would risk to become a projection of man dissociated from his life. For this reason faith is the encounter between the personal You of God who gives himself to man and the availability of man to get involved in a global decision that is never blind or arbitrary, but founded upon the credibility of the event of revelation. In the logic of gratuitousness, revelation appears as a real orientation and answer that it is not measured on the needs of man, but that, without doubt, it gives breath to his expectations and human aspirations. To believe is, therefore, to decentralize oneself in order to find the proper centre in God, it is to give form to one's own existence as an answer to the Word of God that shows how man is not able to give by himself that sense that he can receive only as a gift to be welcomed and to which he must surrender himself.

d) In the project of self-communication by God and the answer by man, the Church assumes an essential task. It is the Church's vocation to be *witness and to transmit* revelation through what

she is and she believes. Although the *Dei Verbum* doesn't speak extensively of the role of the Church, it does present the fundamental idea that the Church belongs to the global figure of revelation and that, being its mediator, presents herself with an originality that is differentiating her in her identity from other realities. Her novelty is born from the fact that it doesn't derive from an improvisation, neither by a contingent necessity. On the contrary, the Church shows the sense and the truth of the history of salvation, in her task of giving voice to the future of God already started with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but *not yet* fully realized. In such sense, "the mystery of the Church is already brought to light by the way it was founded" (LG, 5), being an event of love to the service of the Kingdom. This means at least three things.

First of all, the affirmation that the Church is an *event* that springs from the novelty of the Gospel. It is this unusual news that transforms the daily life of men, making them partaker of an unheard of and possible project of life: the utopia of Love in communion. "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched, we speak of the Word of Life (...), what we have seen and heard we proclaim in turn to you, so that you may share life with us. This fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. Indeed our purpose in writing you this is that our joy may be complete" (1Jn 1, 1-4). Fellowship with God, therefore, becomes a style of life, expression of a quality that the advent of the Kingdom has brought into history. But fellowship is also ability to love the other; it is a constant exodus to which the new community is invited in order to concretize such event of communion, which is an event of salvation and the symbol of a new humanity. Fellowship with God is "the overcoming of the walls of separation, is the anti-Babel, is the new and universal brotherhood. The Church therefore is not only a means for the salvation that is completely beyond. She, really, in her being, is already a communion of love, a first realization of the salvation brought by Christ."<sup>13</sup>

In second place, the Church is a sign of the Kingdom of God. In the New Testament it can be seen how the community of the believers is not identified with the Kingdom of God, both because the kingdom points out the activity of God, and because it fully realizes itself in a dimension that transcends history, even if it is near to it (Mk 1, 15). In this sense, the Christian community, understanding itself as a germinal phase of the Kingdom and next to the last reality, understand its historical task as the mediator of revelation, translator in human languages of the unique Word. The mystery of the Church recalls the revelation of God to man.

Finally the sense of communion and the experience of love, that makes the Church the listener of the Word and of history, create a community of believers oriented to evangelization, that is to the communication of the life and the truth that saves, as it is shown in the constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. In this way, the Church, community of free people, open to everybody, careful and in solidarity with history, becomes a community of service and a *sign of the times*, ready to announce a fascinating alternative because she is living it: the experience of love, of sharing, of justice. In this line, the daily history of the Church will be always a critical and prophetic memory confronting what dehumanizes man, showing her capacity to fill more and more that deep gap between faith and history, Gospel and culture.

## 5. REVELATION, A TRUTH THAT IS FOOD FOR THOUGHT

In the logic of such novelty, the encyclical of John Paul II *Fides et Ratio*<sup>14</sup> find its place, because it assumes revelation as the fundamental and decisive moment for the understanding of the Christian novelty for man. The horizon of reference must be individualized in the desire for *truth*

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<sup>13</sup> S. Dianich, *Comunità*, in G. Barbaglio - S. Dianich (edd.), *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia*, San Paolo, Roma 1979, p. 153. See also in theological-fundamental key S. Pié-Ninot, *Introduzione alla Ecclesiologia*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. *Fides et Ratio*. Lettera enciclica di Giovanni Paolo II. Testo e commento teologico-pastorale a cura di R. Fisichella, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1999.

and in the search of *sense* that embraces the whole existence of man, whereas the life itself asks decisive questions and stirs the desire of possible and meaningful answers. It is the very dynamism of existence that defines “man as the one who seeks the truth” (n.28) through that progressive approach to the mystery of the world and reality that emerges in the urgency of the “question of the meaning of things and of their very existence” (n.1). It is not surprising, therefore, that this is the paradoxical condition of life: an endless search for an answer that might grasp “some thing ultimate which may serve as the ground of all things. In other words they seek a final explanation, a supreme value, which refers to nothing beyond itself and which puts an end to all questioning” (n.27). But the drama of the human existence that holds improper and, sometimes, vain, any reference to what might go beyond man’s reason and his ability to satisfy the demands of a suitable search for truth is played in restlessness and waiting for the realisation of his search.

The consequence of such choice is not only in the cultural awareness of the distance of faith from reason, of a competition that declares faith as *other thing* in comparison to reason, up to consider it as *irrational*, contradictory to reason; but instead it is seen as an indication both theoretical and of method of the extraneousness of faith when looking at the possibility to know reality and to offer sensible answers. Yet, the result of such an opposition doesn't seem to be the happy outcome of a division of competences, but the difficulty to recover the authentic and genuine relationship with life in a moment in which the decline of certainties and the horizons of reference seems to want to justify the fact that “the human being must learn to live in a horizon of total absence of meaning, where every thing is provisional and ephemeral” (n. 91). It is no accident that the contemporary post-modern time experiences a deep crisis of faith and of reason : a crisis of faith, because when it is submitted to the critical fire of reason, it seems incapable to show itself up to the truth, as it is locked in its own subjectivism and in the *privacy* of its rites; a crisis of reason because in the insistence of its self-criticism, it continues in its prejudice against faith, that points out a source of knowledge and intelligibility that doesn't depend on itself and it demands the ability from man to go out of himself in virtue of that constant opening to the mystery that doesn't authorize any prejudice in the desire to know.

But is the opposition between faith and reason a useful one? If one abdicates to one of the two poles doesn't he run the risk to avoid the hard consistency of the truth and the seriousness of human freedom? Or can it be surmised a perspective that makes the one meaningful for the other, truth accessible to freedom, in a reciprocity that doesn't sacrifice the dignity either of the one or of the other?

“Revelation has set within history a point of reference which cannot be ignored if the mystery of human life has to be known. Yet this knowledge refers back constantly to the mystery of God which the human mind cannot exhaust but can only receive and embrace in faith. Between these two poles, reason has its own specific field in which it can inquire and understand, restricted only by its finiteness before the infinite mystery of God” (n.14).

Here is the keystone of the novelty of revelation, in its *excess*, in that *plus* that spurs man to a fundamental decision that demands a binding and radical choice. This happens not only because what is at stake is man’s freedom if he doesn't meet the truth about himself; but also because, in the search of the meaning of his life, revelation presents itself as the true source of such meaning. In this respect, the discourse of the faith doesn't exhaust itself in a vague feeling or religious need, but becomes passion for truth, a truth-revelation non deducible from the human horizons of life and of which the human mind is an untiring researcher. The central position of the principle of revelation points out, therefore, a unique and particular direction: the identity of faith is not perceived in the opposition to reason, but in reference to revelation, a reference which allows reason to be in agreement with truth; besides such reference doesn't implicate an irrational reduction of faith or the decline to a simple opinion, but it signals a different way of knowing, in the moment in which faith becomes witness of a meaning and a truth that cannot be drawn in any other ways.

Knowledge then, is not a stranger to faith, but it is a constitutive moment of the critical reason, if faith is a really human action. Revelation is truth that requires thinking, that “it produces

thought” (n.15), because it is other than man: for this it entrusts itself to man inviting him to an answer and to a responsibility to which he constantly feels called. On the threshold of such call the freedom of man is at risk in its choice for truth, whose concreteness constitutes the great paradox and scandal of Christianity because it replaces an “idea of abstract truth with the idea of a truth as much as possible concrete : the idea of a personal truth, appeared in history, working in history and, from the womb of history itself, able to support the whole history; the idea of this truth in person is Jesus of Nazareth, the fullness of the Revelation.”<sup>15</sup>

## 6. THE DIMENSIONS OF REVELATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

The recovery of the category of revelation crosses the whole theological itinerary of the twentieth-century. The intent is not only to define and to reflect on a decisive category for the understanding of the Christian novelty, but also to clarify the depth of such concept in relationship to its fruitfulness for the life of man. In the contemporary theology, in fact, it is possible to individualize some dimensions or interpretative schemes that characterize the novelty of revelation underlining above all the meaning expressed by revelation in the historical relationship between God and man.

The theologian A. Dulles speaks of models of revelation, individualizing five of them: 1. Revelation as doctrine; 2. Revelation as history; 3. Revelation as internal experience; 4. Revelation as dialectical presence; 5. Revelation as new awareness.<sup>16</sup> J. Moltmann points out, in turn, four principal schemes: *cosmological-evolutionary or historical-universal; anthropological-existential; ontoteological; historical-escatological*.<sup>17</sup> Without entering the worth of the different proposals, it can be affirmed that the event of revelation is the underlying theme that ties the theological reflection of the twentieth century. In the event of revelation there is a strict correlation between the objective aspect, in which God takes the initiative communicating himself to man; and the subjective one, in which man is invited to a free and binding decision, in answer to what makes existence meaningful.

Let us look first at the objective dimension that sets in prominence the *centrality and the priority of God*. Without doubt, K. Barth has been (1886-1968) the one to set in prominence the importance of the otherness of God in relation to history and to the world. It is unthinkable to believe that revelation is something that emerges from the depth of the spiritual conscience of man. Revelation, instead, tells of the new event of God who enters the human history as an event that shows the qualitative difference between God and man. For this reason revelation has an objective dimension that cannot be captured by man’s thought, but can only be accepted in its sovereignty in comparison to the recipient. In this, revelation and Word of God are tightly united, even if God, speaking about himself, doesn’t totally disclose himself, because he remains other in comparison to how much of himself he tells man. “The divine revelation, in which it happens that man reaches the true knowledge of God, is the decision of God, of the same Trinitarian God, to operate with us in such a way that, although we are men and not God we are made partakers of the truth of the knowledge that he has of himself”<sup>18</sup>

The reflection of H. U. Von Balthasar (1905-1988) is following what is already been said. For him revelation is before all a historical demonstration of the Trinitarian love of God that finds its culminating and highly meaningful point in the total love of Christ. In the event Jesus Christ, revelation takes up a unique *form* in which the endless freedom of God is manifested in the

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<sup>15</sup> H. de Lubac, *La rivelazione divina e il senso dell’uomo. Commento alle Costituzioni conciliari Dei Verbum e Gaudium et Spes*, Jaca Book, Milano 1985, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, Orbis Books, New York 1992.

<sup>17</sup> J. Moltmann, *Prospettive della teologia*, Queriniana, Brescia 1973, pp. 14-35.

<sup>18</sup> K. Barth, *Dogmatica ecclesiale. Antologia*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1968, p. 31.

meeting-clashing with the limited freedom of man. This fact points out that revelation cannot be anticipated or determined by the need of man, but only received and understood in the gratuitousness and credibility of Love. Here is the fascinating secret of revelation, here is its ability to attract man to a unique and unexpected understanding: in the unconditional and freest love that cannot be compared, and that for this reason gives form and determines a figure of God coming to meet man that cannot be deducted. "In the presence of the majesty of the absolute love, that in revelation moves towards man, welcomes him, invites him and raises him to an incomprehensible intimacy, the finite spirit has for the first time the presentiment of what definitely means that God is the absolute other."<sup>19</sup> If revelation is *glory*, original figure of the self-communication of God, an unmistakable figure that points out the absolute, then man in front of such glory lives an experience of rapture, in as much as he remains attracted by the immensity of the love of God that goes beyond anything that human reason might foresee. Such an attraction is the condition for an encounter that has no equal, above all because it is God that exposes himself in the gift of himself, up to the insuperable paradox of lowering and humiliating himself (*kenosi*). The uniqueness of revelation is focused in the Pascal mystery. In it the truth of God is rendered explicit as the truth about man and the world. "Now we must leave to Him who comes to meet us, his own language, or better: we must let us be taken up by Him in his dramatic language. The revelation of God is not an object to contemplate, but it is the action of God in the world and on the world, action that from the world can have an answer only by acting, because only by acting his action can be understood"<sup>20</sup>

Secondly let us look at the *subjective and anthropological* aspect. Starting from the awareness that revelation is not reducible to a human idea, however, revelation has to do with existence as R. Bultmann (1884-1976) underlines with particular strength. The key point is in the fact that man plans his existence and that in such continuous planning he finds his own identity. In order to do this, however, he needs another, a You that freely calls him to decide. Revelation is, therefore, an invitation to man to plan in authenticity his existence, because it is an event of God that, reaching man, calls him to leave his own world and sets him in the situation to decide on *how* to live. It is not possible to remain a neutral spectator when faced with the call of God, in as much as in Jesus revelation constitutes the condition of possibility for man to discover the authenticity of the existence, otherwise impenetrable and difficult to realize. "For Jesus God is the power that sets man in the situation of deciding, that goes to meet him in the demand of good, that determines his future. Therefore God cannot at all be "objectively" considered as a nature restful on himself; man instead, only in the real understanding of his existence can also understand God. If he doesn't find Him here, it will not find him in any other nature."<sup>21</sup>

Within such horizon, the reflection of K. Rahner (1904-1984) must be placed. Man is characterized by an openness to God, from a constitutive reference to the Mystery that makes him experience the contrast between his historicity and his spirituality, between a desire to stay anchored to the concreteness of things and the aspiration to go beyond them. The drama of man consist, therefore, in the continuous necessity to choose whether or not to become a person through the encounter with the original Freedom, without which man could not be free and able to give an answer. In other words, man defines himself beginning from his relationship with God, from that revelation that represents the problem of his identity, but also the mystery of his own realization, disclosed in the incarnation of Christ. It is not without motive that the authentic revelation of God is dialogical and possesses a character of event: it doesn't manifest what man could interpret and read anywhere in the world, however it opens the question on God, and puts man in question. "Instead authentic revelation discloses [...] what in the world and for man is still unknown: the intimate reality of God and his free personal relationship toward the spiritual creature."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> H. U. von Balthasar, *Solo l'amore è credibile*, Borla, Roma 1991, p. 59.

<sup>20</sup> H. U. von Balthasar, *Teodrammatica I: Introduzione al dramma*, Jaca Book, Milano 1980, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> R. Bultmann, *Gesù*, Queriniana, Brescia 1972, p. 185.

<sup>22</sup> K. Rahner, *Corso fondamentale sulla fede. Introduzione al concetto di cristianesimo*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1990<sup>4</sup>, p. 229.

It is the event of the self-communication of God what man interprets in his openness to the Absolute and such an event shows how the existence is marked by the dialectics of being a creature. Man can accept or refuse the provocation of God who calls him to be a careful listener of the Word. Nevertheless, the transcendental characteristic of man is a gift of God that happens in the concreteness of his life. The transcendence, in fact, expresses the movement that spurs man and his search for meaning pointing out where the search can find satisfaction. But, at the same time, it reminds man that transcendence is not originated from his abilities, but it is the threshold allowing him to glimpse to a project: a history of salvation that takes shape in the spaces of the freedom to love. In such sense, revelation is never a reality man can deduct from psychological evidence, or from a historical necessity. Its gratuitousness comes before even to its historical dimension. "Man is the being who, freely loving, finds himself faced with a God of a possible revelation. Man is in an attitude of listening either to the word or to the silence of God in the measure in which he opens himself, freely loving, to this message of the word or the silence of the God of revelation. He listens then to this message of the God who is free, if he has not delimited with a false love the absolute horizon of his openness to the being in general removing therefore from the start to the word of the free God the possibility to express what pleases him and to tell us in what way he wants to meet us"<sup>23</sup>

In third place, the reflection has a *historical dimension*, because in history, seen as a space opened to the self-communication of God to man, the understanding of the meaning of revelation is conjugated with the awaited salvation and with the question about God as a sensible offer for man. In the context of such demands, the affirmation that revelation has a clear objectivity, doesn't express only a worry about verification of it, but it tells of an attention to a reality whose concreteness clashes against the possibility to idealize the initiative of God. It sends us back to the historical facts in which God appears realizing the promise to bring the project of salvation to completion. Credit should be given to W. Pannenberg (and to a group of his theologians and exegetes friends), to have theorized a particularly meaningful connection between revelation and history, proposing some thesis able to render explicit the theory of *revelation as history*, also in answer to those tendencies that brought back the specificity of revelation only to the word of God. The proposed theses open some indicative lines of reflection:

"Thesis 1: God's self-revelation, according to the biblical testimonies did not happen in a direct way, for instance on the way of a theophany, but indirectly, through the historical deeds of God.

Thesis 2: Revelation doesn't take place at the beginning, but at the end of the revealing history.

Thesis 3: differently from particular apparitions of the divinity, the history-revelation is open to all who have eyes to see. It has a universal character.

Thesis 4: The universal revelation of the divinity of God is not realized in the history of Israel yet, but only in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, since in him it is realized the end of all the events in advance.

Thesis 5: The event of Christ reveals the divinity of the God of Israel not as an isolated event, but only as part of God's history with Israel.

Thesis 6: the development of conceptions about revelation outside Judaism, in the Christian Churches of pagan origin expresses the universality of the eschatological self-manifestation of God in the fate of Jesus.

Thesis 7: the word is in relationship with revelation as preannouncement, directive and relationship."<sup>24</sup>

Beyond possible interpretations, the intention of the author is evident. He looks out upon the idea of revelation in the multiplicity of the historical experiences testified by Scripture, that finds in Jesus Christ the definitive manifestation of God. In this light the other manifestations must be read. This not only expresses the attention to the universality of the Christological revelation, but it also points out how the different words and events belong to the revelation of the saving project of God,

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<sup>23</sup> K. Rahner, *Uditori della Parola*, Borla, Roma 1977<sup>2</sup>, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Rivelazione come storia*, EDB, Bologna 1969, pp. 163-195.

whose definitive figure must be realized in the identity of the Risen Lord, an event that anticipates and recapitulates the preceding and the future histories of the divine self-revelation.

Within these coordinates, we can read the interpretative keys given by P. Tillich (1886-1965), who thinks of revelation as the *answer to the last questions* that pursue the human existence; and J. Alfaro (1914-1993) who considers revelation as the *meaning of history*, whereas the search of man meets with the possibility to experience God as he who offers a sense to the events that fill the human living. For the American theologian P. Tillich, revelation renders explicit the presupposition that man is the question but not the answer, especially at the moment in which the decisive matters about existence are at stake. It is false to affirm that reason is opposed to revelation; at least the reason that is open to the mystery of life and that does not conceitedly close itself up in the easy recipes of a technical security. Likewise, revelation doesn't alter the investigative processes of the human reason, but it integrates them in the vast field of the truth about man and the world. "The answers found implicitly in the event of revelation are meaningful only in the measure in which they are in correlation with the questions that concern the whole of our existence, that is, with existential questions. Only those people who have experienced the *shock* of what is transitory, the anxiety in taking conscience of their finitude and the threat of the not-being, can understand what the notion of God means."<sup>25</sup>

According to the Spanish theologian J. Alfaro, the true problem that crosses the different situations of the existence is the problem of meaning. It is on this level that situations like happiness, love, failure, pain, death are matters for the questioning about the sense and on the not-sense of life and they shape the *radical restlessness* of man. The fact that such questioning be born in such situations it is because in them man can reach the salvation of his own existence. He reaches it exactly in making the experience that sense and not-sense cohabit in his daily living, in a history that is essentially determined by the human freedom. The fundamental matter is, therefore, in the possibility that man has to give a foundation and a justification to his freedom that often oscillates between the desire of an inexhaustible and beneficent progress and the unpredictability of a history that escapes the human programs leaving traces of regression and violence. It is difficult to say if this global experience of the search of meaning opens or closes man to the encounter with God. One thing is certain that the problem of God is set in the dynamics of a search that, if it can be understood as the ultimate "«why» imposed by the problem itself regarding man,"<sup>26</sup> it is such in virtue of the fact that God in provoking the question shows himself as he who is searching and coming to meet man. God reveals himself as transcendent Freedom and ultimate Future that gives origin to man's hope, arousing that decisional freedom that breaks the foolishness of existence. Revelation doesn't alienate man from its responsibilities, neither it reduces his freedom, but puts man in the possibility to answer and to be open to the unpredictable initiative of God, because it discloses that freedom and hope can give sense to the life only if they don't fall back on themselves, contradicting their own identity. If the questioning about God prefigures the answer to the self-revelation of God, if the subjectivity of man and his historical being constitute decisive dimensions for the absolutely free event of revelation "this means that man is in his nature fundamentally open to the eventuality of the self-revelation of God."<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, the theological reflection of the twentieth century both Protestant and Catholic, has set in prominence the centrality of revelation and, in a particular way, the pretension of the Christian revelation to be *believable and meaningful*, in as much as man, faced with the radically new and unusual revelation of Jesus of Nazareth, perceives to have being called to an unheard of meaning. Not only, but the meaning of the mystery of revelation possesses a value for every man, it is *meaningful for me*, and it is addressed to the concreteness of my life in the form of a *love* and a freedom bringing with them the fascination of truth. This is the ultimate sign of the credibility of revelation, but also the deep secret of the mystery that man is to himself, beyond which the search

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<sup>25</sup> P. Tillich, *Teologia sistemática I. Religione e rivelazione. L'essere e Dio*, Claudiana, Torino 1996, p. 77.

<sup>26</sup> J. Alfaro, *Dal problema dell'uomo al problema di Dio*, Queriniana, Brescia 1991, p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> J. Alfaro, *Rivelazione cristiana, fede e teologia*, Queriniana, Brescia 1986, p. 66.

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of truth and meaning becomes specious . “In order that a subject might see revelation as meaningful for himself it is necessary that the first action, able to wake up in the subject the ability to know how to gather the whole evidence of that event, be coming from revelation itself.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> R. Fisichella, *Credibilità*, in R. Latourelle – R. Fisichella (edd.), *Dizionario di Teologia Fondamentale*, Cittadella Editrice, Assisi 1990, p. 228.