

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

The Bible Unbaffled—What’s in It for Us? Theology on Tap Sunday, July 7, 2002
6:30 PM St. Joseph Church Hall, Downers Grove, IL

Well, good evening, everyone. I’d like to begin with a prayer.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” Heavenly Father, we ask you to send your Spirit into our hearts and minds. We depend upon your enlightenment, your wisdom, your understanding, your gifts, to elevate our minds, to comprehend how you communicate with us and enrich our faith. And we ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Well, tonight I aspire to share something with you on the Holy Scripture. And I would like to entertain questions maybe half way through so that I don’t simply go on and on about something I’ve already prepared, but respond to where you’re actually coming from.

A couple years ago the *US News and World Report* magazine issued this edition. It was October of 1999, and it says, “Is the Bible True?” And it shows Adam and Eve and an apple. Well, in this particular version of this magazine the authors bring up various historical facts and indicate how they are compatible, you might say, with the biblical record.¹ Well, if you ever want to look that up in the library, it’s somewhat interesting, but not really—not that informative. In fact, it’s not informative at all! But I’m not really knocking it; it’s just the truth.

One of the problems that most of us have with the Bible is, like so many other things, we are too familiar—or we think we are. If we were to start talking about the Upanishads, we might say, “Well, gee, I don’t know anything about the Upanishads. I’ve never even heard of them!” And we’d have to go back into the history of Indian culture and on and on and on. Or if someone said, “Well, let’s talk about the writings of Confucius,” we’d say, “Well, gee, do you know anything about Confucius? What language did he use? When did he write?”—and so on. But when it comes to the Bible we think we know because we’re familiar with the Bible. But the fact is we don’t know much about the Bible as individuals. Just because we grew up in the Church doesn’t mean we know much about the Bible. And do not think the reason you don’t know much about the Bible is that you’re a Catholic. People who have gone to so-called “Bible school” know less about the Bible than people who never studied anything because largely they learn either irrelevancies or actually errors. So don’t feel yourself disadvantaged. We just don’t know much about the Bible, but we can learn. Okay.

First of all, **the word itself, *biblia*, is a word that means “books.”** So when we talk about the Bible, we’re using a plural—the books, it means. In the Hebrew Bible, that is the Bible of the people of the Old Testament—we call it the “Old Testament,” they, of course, did not, do not; they call it the “**Tanak**”—**which stands for Torah[Law], Nebiim[Prophets], and Ketuvim[Writings].**

Now I know these words I’m throwing out may seem like Greek to you. But you have to learn a few words, special words. This is a very important word, “**canon.**” It’s not

with two N's; that would be something you shoot. This means **canon as an official list of authenticated books**. And the Hebrew people, the Jewish people, have a canon of books they've approved; and there are thirty-nine of them. There are also seven books that circulated—actually more than seven—seven books that circulated in the Diaspora—seven plus, I'll put it that way. And of the seven plus books seven of them are accepted as canon in the Catholic Church, but not among the Jews and not among non-Catholics. But they were written in either Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic. They do not directly witness to Christ, so they are not part of the New Testament. But they are not part of the Jewish Scriptures either. But we in the Catholic Church call them part of the Old Testament. So I'm throwing a few words around. I'm going to put them up here. **“Tanak or Hebrew Bible”**: if you are talking to Jewish people, please don't call their book the “Old Testament.” Call it the “Hebrew Bible.”

In your **Catholic version** of the Bible you will find books that are called **Deuterocanonical; that means the secondary canon**. It means the books that the **Hebrew rabbis would not accept, but the Catholic bishops did accept**. So those are called “Deuterocanonical books.”

“Intertestamental” is a word used to refer to a body of literature that was written after the last prophet, who was Malachi, wrote and before the coming of Christ. Now when you use the word “intertestamental” your focus has shifted now. You're thinking from a Christian viewpoint, because if you say intertestamental, **you're already saying that there are two testaments and this is between them**. So when you're speaking to Jewish people and you say “intertestamental,” they'll say, “What are you talking about?” See, so intertestamental” is a Christian term. I'm really not trying to confuse you.

Another term you're going to read, and especially if you pick up certain Bibles, they will list “Apocrypha.” **Apocrypha is more or less the same thing as deuterocanonical except it has about four books that are not really deuterocanonical**. Now the word “Apocrypha” implies something bad, something inauthentic, something not true. See, that's the implication of the word. However, that is, again, an interpretation because non-Catholics do not accept the canonical status of these seven books I mentioned before, such as the Book of Wisdom, such as Sirach, such as parts of Esther, and the Book of Judith, and parts of Daniel. And because of that they use the word “Apocrypha” with a negative connotation. But sometimes two different words refer to the same thing. Now there happen to be a couple of books like Third and Fourth Esdras, which are accepted by neither Roman Catholics nor Greek Orthodox nor Protestants. So there you have it.

And, of course, there is the New Testament, and you know what that is. **The New Testament contains twenty-seven books**. All the books of the New Testament are written in Greek, although Jesus, as far as we know, did not speak Greek. The apostles did not speak Greek. There may have been Aramaic antecedents, but we don't have any in print. If there were any, they have been lost. Papias, who was an early historian, said that there was an Aramaic Book of Words, *Logia* Book, which is another way of saying “sayings” or you could say “teachings” in an informal sense. And he talked about that, but we have never found it. I mean, there's no existent copy today. So what we have is what we have.

Now what about the actual manuscripts themselves? Well, there are several major manuscripts, but we cannot say that any one of them is the original. So really **we don't have any original manuscripts as far as we know, but we do have copies.** The newest copy—no, not the newest copy, the oldest copy—the oldest copy of the Old Testament in Greek is about from the fourth century. Strangely enough, the oldest copy of the Hebrew—Old Testament in Hebrew—is ninth century. So we have an older Greek version than we do a Hebrew version. Which should we prefer? Well, that's a matter of opinion. Some scholars traditionally said that the older is better because it's older, but today many say, no, the Hebrew is better because it's Hebrew. Now which is correct? It's a matter of opinion.

And this is something we're going to have to get used to. In regard to a lot of questions about the Bible the real answer is, "I don't know"—and nobody knows! Even, we'd have to say, the Church doesn't know because there are questions about—they're not really about the faith—they are about the material itself of the Scriptures.

At any rate when we talk about the Bible, we are talking about the **books that belong to somebody.** We are either talking about the Jewish Bible, we're talking about the Christian Bible; we're talking about the Catholic version; we're talking about the Protestant version; we're talking about somebody's version. And it is very important to keep this in mind: we are always talking about someone's version, some group's version, some body's—by "body" here I mean body of believers—version. The Bible does not exist independently of people! Actually no book exists independently of people. Every book was produced by someone as intended for a certain audience. And the Bible is literature like that. **It was produced by someone for a specific audience.**

Now we might believe, and it turns out rightly so, that the Bible is written for us and that we might read it; and that's true, but in an indirect way. It was not originally written for us. It was not written for people who speak English in the twenty-first century. The Bible was written over a long period of time, starting perhaps as early as the tenth century BC all the way up until around 150 AD. Presumably every time any part of the Bible was written, it was written for a contemporary audience—presumably. Now there are people at the Moody Bible Institute who will argue that point and say, "Oh, no, the Book of Revelation was written for us in the twenty-first century." That is presumably false from my point of view and from the point of view of ninety-nine percent of those who study Scriptures. But I want to reemphasize that **when we look at Scripture there is no neutral way of looking at it. You are going to read Scripture as a member of a particular body because if you don't, you're going to be outside of the interest area for which the Bible is written.** It can't really possibly mean anything to people who step outside of the very purpose for which it is written. And that has to sink in.

So as I speak, I speak as a member of the Catholic Church, which is, first of all, a very large Church. It has a very long history going back to the apostles. One thousand years of Catholic history—the **Latin Western Church and the Greek Eastern Church were united in one tradition, although with very different styles, and their doctrines and teachings were interrelated and integrated completely.** And those teachings formed the basis for the beliefs and creeds, which then later on grew and developed in the second millennium and up until today. Now it's true the Greek Orthodox Church and the Roman

Catholic Church have developed somewhat differently in terms of liturgy, policy, all kinds of other things. But actually in terms of our basic beliefs, we are the same because we have come from the same body.

As you know, during the time of the **Reformation various church groups cut off from this original matrix and formed their own beliefs.** And they have adopted the Bible, at least in part, as their own book. So a Baptist can take the Bible and say, “This is our book.” Nothing really can stop them from saying that because they have adopted it. The book was not written by Baptists, but then the book wasn’t written by Catholics either. The book was written by early Christians before the idea of the Catholic Church actually took root. And maybe I need to mention a word about that. **The idea of the Catholic Church took root only after great controversies arose about, well, what do we believe?**

And I will bring this up later, but there is a great issue of **belief as a matter of choice.** Actually, all beliefs are choices. Even the belief that there is no God is a choice, or that there is a God is a choice. The belief that the Catholic Church is the true Church is a choice, or the belief that the Baptist Church is really the family of God is a choice. These are all choices. Whether they are reasonable or not, I don’t want to go into now. That’s something we have to grapple with for our whole life; that’s some of the things that the chairperson in his introduction this evening was bringing up: “What’s reasonable?” But they are choices.

And what early pastors of the Church recognized is that people on their own, just making decisions on their own, were likely to get all screwed up in terms of making decisions about what actually Christ means, or what actually is the nature of God, and what does the Bible really say about salvation. Or to put it a better way, what do we really believe about salvation? What do we believe about God? So all those points arose; and so the pastors of the Church decided—under the influence of the Holy Spirit, I believe—to communicate with each other and **to create a consensus** and to live in that consensus and to maintain a communion with each other based on that consensus of faith. And so they developed what was called the “Katholika.” Now the **Katholika meant simply all those churches in union with each other.** It is the Katholika that hammered out, with a certain amount of controversy, the basic Creed that we say on Sunday. “We believe in one God,” and so on. All those different articles of faith were worked out by the bishops of the Katholika. And it is **the bishops of the Katholika that laid down then the creedal foundation for the Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church.**

This Church believes that God inspired some books—some books—some out of many and that these inspired books are appropriate for nurturing the faith. But now I hope you understand this progression. It is the Church or the Churches who came to a consensus about what we are as Church, what the meaning of Christ is, what the meaning of salvation is, who God is, who came to consensus concerning the inner life of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the nature of Christ being both human and divine. This very same Church then decided which books were inspired. Some people turn this backwards and they act as if the inspired books determine the faith. Not exactly—not exactly. And it seems to me that we have to be very upfront about this. If there is no Holy Spirit, let’s all

go home! **If there is no Holy Spirit, let's go home because if there is no Spirit leading and directing the believing Church and its teachers and pastors, then it doesn't really matter what the Bible says because it's they who have chosen specific books, twenty-seven specific books.**

Now you might say, "Were there others?" Yes, have you ever heard of the Gospel of Philip? Or the Gospel of Thomas? You might not have heard of them, but they exist. But the Church didn't choose them. Why? Because they didn't resonate with the faith that the Holy Spirit had led them to embrace. So what comes first? Really, **the faith comes first.** That's something I really want to impress upon you. Faith comes first. And it's the faith that leads to the production of biblical texts under the inspiration of the Spirit, and leads to the acceptance of those texts by the believers. And **the Holy Spirit has to be on both sides of the equation: producing and accepting.** And if the Holy Spirit would inspire someone to produce some work and did not inspire the Church to accept it, it would be lost. You understand? It has to be both.

Now furthermore, **each of the individual parts of this New Testament canon was written specifically for a specific local community,** and we don't actually know which ones. There's a lot of guessing going on about that. For example, the Gospel of John, where did that come from? Well, nobody is quite sure. They think maybe a community near Ephesus or in Ephesus or Antioch. What about the Gospel of Matthew? Well, the Gospel of Matthew was produced by some community. Some inspired author or authors—there's no need to think of only one; it can be more than one collaborating—produced a gospel for a particular community. All we can call that community is the "Matthian community." Now actually we don't even know who Matthew was. Some say, "Well, the Matthew who wrote the gospel is Matthew the tax collector who was one of the apostles. That's unlikely.

First of all, the fact of the matter is—and this is a fact—the early gospels circulated in the early Church with no name on them at all. They didn't call them anything. They were anonymous. Okay? **The four gospels were anonymous.** It was **Irenaeus** of Lyons, who was a bishop in the early Church, who **labeled them.** He labeled them. He said that the first one we are going to call "Matthew," the second one "Mark," the third "Luke," the fourth "John." All right? And when he did that he took Luke and he separated it from its companion volume which is called the "Acts of the Apostles." Luke and Acts of the Apostles really is one book with two parts. Or it's one opus, you could say, one work with two volumes. Okay. So he named them, but those names don't mean anything to us. They are just names. He could have said one, two, three, four. But we keep the names because why not? So whoever the author or authors of the first gospel we call that one, or several people, just "Matthew." We call that the "Gospel of Matthew." Notice the Church doesn't say according to St. Matthew, because if it said St. Matthew—which the people used to do years ago but don't do it now—that would imply it was one person and we know who it is. But when we say, "A reading from the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans," we do say "St. Paul." Why? Because we know there was a St. Paul and he wrote a letter to the Romans. But we don't say the Gospel according to St. Matthew; we say, "Matthew" because it's just a name. "Mark" is just a name. "John" is just a name. "Luke"

is just a name. So it's not important we know. Why? Because of the abiding Spirit of truth in the believers who have affirmed the inspiration of these books.

Now when it comes to **St. Paul's writings, they are basically correspondence.** He wrote to various churches that he had founded. Rome is a very significant one; Corinth is another, Colossae another, Thessalonica another, and so on. So he wrote to them, and that's what we call the "Pauline Literature."

Each piece of the Bible, each section, has a specific history to it and has a specific nature. The four gospels are really proclamations of the life and ministry and teachings of Jesus Christ, which are a prelude to a proclamation of his ignominious and inglorious death and betrayal and, of course, his resurrection and ascension. So if you understand what the authors are trying to do, you have some idea of what form they're using; and they put into that work whatever they had available: the stories of the community, the stories of Jesus' miracles, the sayings, and so on. St. Paul, on the other hand, has a different interest altogether. Do you ever hear St. Paul talk about Christ? Only as the one who has died and risen. He talks about him as the reigning Lord, but he doesn't talk about his historical life, his past, his mission, his words, his teachings. Does he ever quote him? He wasn't interested. So we always have to get into the mind of the author.

If we get into the mind of the author, we are getting into what is called technically the "literal sense." It is so important that we understand that by literal sense, in the Catholic tradition anyway, we mean **what the author was trying to say.** That's very important because there are other Christians who think the literal sense means whatever occurs to them when they open the book. They open it; they read it. Oh, it means that! Well, how do you know? You don't know! It was not written in English. It was not written for someone who lives in the twenty-first century. It was written in Greek. It was written for some community centuries ago, and if we really want to get to the literal sense, we better learn something about Greek, we better learn something about history, we better learn something about the tradition of our Church, because if we don't have knowledge about that, we will never get to the literal sense. And that's why we need in the Church **scholars who are going to study the things that have to be studied.**

Now there were in the early **Church communities**—I don't know how many, but some—**that weren't in union with this Katholika.** So don't get the idea that in the beginning we had this tight, little, harmonious community of loving, sweet, giving, compliant people who affirmed the same beliefs at all times. No, actually what it was, was something like this: at first we had all kinds of different groups and they grow on their own. Then they realized the danger they were facing, the danger of subjectivism, the danger of every group formulating a message that didn't sound the same as another group because, don't forget, the **Church understood itself as having a mission to spread the gospel to the four corners of the earth.**

Well, it would have to be more or less consistent. And that's why the Katholika developed, because of this need for a consistency. And when that **consistency was actually produced within the mind of the believers, this is called "tradition"**—tradition. So the consistency had to be both lateral, meaning it had to extend from Palestine to Egypt, from Egypt to Asia Minor, from Asia Minor over to Greece, from

Greece over to Iraq, from Iraq over to Rome, from Rome to Spain, from Spain to Gaul—laterally in this way. But not only laterally, which is what we call “communal”—**the lateral consistency was called “communal of the Katholika.”** And that’s where we get the idea of “Catholic communion.” But also there has to be consistency from 1950 to 1960 to 1970 to 1980 to 2001 to 2002, or if I went to the beginning, I’d say, from 80 to 90 to 100 to 150 to 180 to 200, and so on. And that’s where you get *traditio* **because it means that the mind of the Church is handed on from generation to generation.** And how is it handed on? In three ways: **the Scriptures, the preaching, and what we call the “apostolic succession,”** that is, that the bishops were always ordained by other bishops in memory of the apostles.

But there were groups that said, “Oh, we don’t really care what the Katholika says; in fact, we think they’re all a bunch of idiots, and we like our faith better.” And some might have even said, “We are the true Christians,” especially a group called the “**Gnostics.**” The Gnostics said, “Hey, we actually have **secret traditions** that you don’t have”—secret traditions—“going back to the apostles, and we know what you don’t know.” Now that was one of the big early fissures, arguments, controversies, in the Church. Is the knowledge of Christ, is knowledge of salvation an open book? I’m using this metaphorically. Is it something anybody can come to? The Catholic view is, the view of the Katholika is, that it’s open. Anybody who seeks can find. You have to make allowances for personal abilities, personal intelligence, but there is nothing hidden from the public. This is partly what is meant by “revelation.” Revelation is revealed, disclosed, open, given. See? But this other group called “Gnostics” said, “Nah, nah, nah. We have secret knowledge. You don’t have it. We have it. If you don’t have what we have, then you are missing something important; and we’re not going to tell you what it is!”

Question: Are they still here?

I find them all over the place, personally! But anyway they had their books, too, like the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Thomas and quite a few other things. And in the early Church, a lot of the officials, especially after 300 AD, a lot of the politicians who became Catholic later on, didn’t like these folks because they caused so much trouble; so they burned a lot of their books. So then we don’t even know what they talked about, except through the writings of people like Irenaeus, who told us what stupid things they said. But not too long ago—back in the 40’s, I think—there was a discovery made in Egypt in Nag Hammadi in which many scrolls of an early Gnostic group were discovered. So now we do know something of what they wrote. But their faith was not the same as the faith of the Katholika; there’s no two ways about it—**it’s a different faith! And what they produced is a different kind of bible.** It’s a different kind of scripture. It’s a different kind of gospel. It is not similar. You can go to the library and probably get it and read it. You can see it’s not the same thing. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are not identically word for word the same, but they are telling more or less the same story. But these others are not. They’re telling a different story. Now this is very important that you get this difference.

The truthfulness, the authenticity, the validity of the Scriptures is not in its slavish conformity or any kind of rigid sameness, otherwise we wouldn’t have four gospels. But the consistency lies on another plain of understanding. And there may even

be—if we have time to talk about it and you're interested—we may even talk about historical inconsistencies which have to do with details, not important details; but they are there. Okay? But when you get to the Gnostic gospels, you're getting into significant differences. You're getting into profound, essential, truths that are being denied by the Gnostics while they are affirmed by the Katholika, or vice versa: they are denied by the Katholika; they are affirmed by the Gnostics. **So it is faith that helps us to determine what is authentic, what is authentic Bible**, what is authentic Scripture. It's not authentic Scripture that helps us determine what is authentic faith. I hope that's clear.

Then that leads to another conclusion, which, again, I would like to emphasize. There is no general meaning of the Bible. It's not like, well, there's a Catholic view, and then there's a Baptist view, and then there's a Free Church view, and then there's the Lutherans' view, and then there's the general view. Oh no, there is no general view; there is no neutral view. **There's always a view of a believing body.** Furthermore, if you bother to read Scripture, you will see—Old and the New Testament both, that is, Hebrew and Greek, both—you will see that the Bible is written in such a way as to **encourage other people to enter into the community that believes in what the Bible expresses.** So it is of its nature **an inviting sort of literature**, if you want to put it that way.

Now in the Old Testament it's not so obvious, but it really is there. In the Bible there's a lot about how all nations shall come eventually to Mount Zion. See? Now it's true that's not the only spirit. There's sometimes a sort of exclusiveness, almost nationalistic, mentality. But the other is there, and it really becomes accentuated in the teachings of Christ and in the teachings of the apostles.

Now as the Church itself grows and develops, of course, **there are different schools of thought about how to interpret the Bible.** And we don't really have to worry in a deep way about that today, but just to know there are differences—among Jews, as well. For example, there are Orthodox Jews, Reformed Jews, Conservative Jews, Liberal Jews. You know this. They all have their own synagogues or temples. Well, although we don't have our own synagogues or we don't have our own temples or churches, but among Catholics are there not orthodox Catholics, liberal Catholics, conservative Catholics, reformed Catholics? Yes, there are. They don't wear labels outwardly and they don't form separate groups, but those differences lie within the Church. And I think one of the great strengths of the Church is that we don't have our own individual parishes. We don't have a conservative parish, a liberal parish, and so on. It is true that the majority of some parish may be more one way or the other, but **the Church itself encourages integration of all these different points of view.**

Now among Christians on a wider level we have Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Protestant, Baptist, Fundamentalists. Then the Protestants break down into, as you know, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and so on and so on and so on. Each of these churches, each of these sects, each group, takes the Bible as its own and then finds its own faith in the Bible. **So we cannot use the Bible as a way to prove that we're right or someone else is wrong.** Nor can we use the Bible to reach a common ground. **The Bible won't give us a common ground in itself, because it always has to be interpreted.** We have to arrive at a common ground first, if we can. You see this? See what I'm getting at? The Bible is not the answer to our questions. To think it is, is to

abuse it—it's to misuse it; it's to misunderstand what it is, where it came from, how it originated, how it survived. So we really have to understand what the Bible is.

Faith itself, now, faith is a choice. Now at least it's a human choice. It's always a human choice. Is it a choice influenced by God? Maybe. Now I believe that faith in Christ is a gift from God, but I cannot prove this to you. I believe, the Church believes, that faith in Christ is a gift from God. But what we can prove is it's a choice. In other words, whether you believe it's a gift or not, it is something we choose to accept or not. Faith in science is also a choice—whether it's a gift of God is another matter. But if I say I will believe only in what can be proved by the scientific method, I am making a choice. **No matter what I decide I'm going to believe, it is a choice.** Reason itself will not force us to accept too much in life. Life is so complicated and our reason so undeveloped that **we won't be forced to accept much in life by reason alone.**

So our beliefs are really important. And I personally believe **it's very important for us to think about what we believe and why we believe it, and to recognize the role the Church has of presenting and proposing to us what has been revealed** and what has been handed down over centuries, two thousand years now. If we want to study the Bible and it's meaning, we have to place ourselves in some tradition and study the Bible from that tradition. Now while we're doing this we may come to a point in saying, "This tradition doesn't answer all my questions." This has happened recently with certain Evangelical theologians who came to the conclusion that their Evangelical tradition didn't answer all their questions. Scott Hahn is one, for example. He wrote a book called *Rome Sweet Home* because he came to believe that the Catholic tradition was able to answer his questions, and the one he came from didn't. But that is a very profoundly personal choice, and **all conversion experiences are profoundly personal choices.** And I believe they are touched by God, leading to God, really.

Now some traditions though would seem to be more consistent than others, but actually this is not a matter of faith. This is a judgment of reason. So when I talk about faith, everything isn't faith. There's a point where **reason has to make judgments about: Is this consistent? Does this answer my questions? Does this make sense?** In our Catholic tradition, reason and faith are very important and they are very integrated. **St. Thomas Aquinas says, "The Catholic Faith is a rational faith."** It's *rationalis*; it's rational. Now the word "rational" in modern times has a funny connotation that he didn't intend. But he means it's very compatible with at least his mind, his intellect, his judgment.

I think this will be a good time to entertain your questions before we go on to new material. It's better to learn one thing well than glide over all kinds of other stuff. So do you have any questions?

Question: Why did the Church oppose translation of the Bible into the English Language in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? Isn't it true that Catholics have a hard time studying the Bible on their own and they tend to depend on priests?

Okay. Well, those are two different questions, really. One question is: Why did the Church oppose translation of the Bible? And the other is: Isn't it true that Catholics have

a hard time studying the Bible on their own and they tend to depend upon priests? Well, those are two different issues, but maybe they're related. I can't speak authoritatively on either of them really, but as far as the first one—translating. Well, there was a translation from the Greek into Latin by St. Jerome. And there had been an earlier one before him, and it wasn't that good. Jerome was in the 300's. See? Now once they had that in the West—Latin, don't forget, was **the** written language in the Western world. Okay. The only written language in the Western world—for centuries! In fact, I think one of the first works not written in Latin was Dante, you know, *The Divine Comedy*. That was written actually in Italian. And Boccaccio [wrote in Italian.] And the *Song of Roland* was an epic written in French. *Beowulf* [in Old English.] These are rare works written in non-Latin languages in the West. So there really wasn't a literate language except for Latin. So there was a tendency not to want to translate because what you would be translating into would be some sort of very colloquial language. How could you control the meaning of anything? I mean, there was no dictionary. Was it Johnson who wrote the first dictionary—Dr. Johnson? So, I mean, it just wasn't an appropriate time yet to translate. Luther wrote the first translation as I know in German, and he did a wonderful job. He was a very talented person. But he actually created the German language as we know it today by doing it. In other words, there were all these dialects. Well, in a sense, High German is the result of Luther's New Testament. So that was just happening. That was the sixteenth century though. Okay. So before that it just wasn't quite ready, although there were translations, but not official. And as far as I know, the Church did encourage quite a bit of study, but not necessarily every man to himself.

And that leads to the next thing: **the basic way to read Scripture is in the community of believers.** Okay? Now one of the problems was that even the priests were often not well trained. Until the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century there was no mandatory seminary system. Some priests were well trained by other priests who were well trained by priests before them, but other priests were not well trained. And some could not really understand Latin. They were taught to read the Mass, but they didn't actually know the language. So many priests, especially secular priests, were very ignorant. The order priests were more educated. For example, the Dominicans, even the Franciscans sometimes, had more education. So there was the quality of education, too, and a tendency not to let and want everybody to translate the Bible for themselves or to understand the Bible for themselves. But if you look at the history of the Reformation Churches, you can see what happened **when it was every man for himself. You end up with hundreds and thousands of different sects and churches.** So that's part of it.

A lot of times what they say is their teaching the Bible is not! For example, take the very famous idea of Luther, you know, "Salvation is by faith alone." Well, he added the word *allein* (alone) in the text, and it wasn't in there. And even his own Lutheran brothers said, "You know, Martin, you added a word." And he said, "Well, it should have been in there." Well, it was a one-sided interpretation.

Now of course, that concept that Paul was getting at is that justification really comes as a grace. It's not something one merits. And that's very true. But it's also true that there are all kinds of phrases in the New Testament and other works about working out your salvation, being sure to be fruitful, you know, "bear fruit, fruit that will last." There are so

many different phrases. So to say that everything is all on one side is really one-sided. And Martin did do that; Martin Luther did do that. In fact, he said that the Letter to the Romans was a canon within the canon. We're talking about canons! Well, the Letter to the Romans is **the** canon, and he said that the way you know what other books are inspired is if they agree with Romans! And then he knew that the Letter to James didn't, because the Letter to James really stresses the importance of good works, so he didn't like that; and he said it was an "epistle of straw." But you see, that's very subjective; and you see, that's the great danger that we all have if we are on our own. And the fact that people go to Bible school doesn't stop them from being subjective, because they may be subjected to the subjective views of the Bible school teacher or the pastor of that particular church. So it is a little bit dangerous.

Now in the Catholic Faith, you might say it's a negative. It's very complex and complicated, but it's also rich and has a deep tradition; and it's true it's hard for any one of us to completely grasp. But in that richness there's also a great deal of wealth, and maybe it's better if **we humbly seek our way with a community of believers, not really looking for answers, but sharing our insights.** I think that's a better approach because, don't forget, Scripture is addressed to a believing community.

Question: About the scrolls.

Well, that's a good question, but you would have to say contradict in what way? Contradict historically? Contradict theologically? There are scrolls that contradict theologically what we believe—the Gnostic. There are people who don't believe what we believe. So of course they could have scrolls that express what they believe. As far as facts go, that's another interesting point. You know, our beliefs are historical, but the historical part of our beliefs is rather modest. Look at the Creed. We believe in Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, rose from the dead. These are historical realities, but is there a lot of historical reality that is essential to our faith? Not really. Apart from the person of Christ, how would our faith be challenged? Incidentally in this magazine article they mention that they found some reference to Pontius Pilate in some dig somewhere. Also they mention David's name. Now I never doubted that David was an historical person, but apparently many people did. On the other hand, I'm not sure that everything it says in the Old Testament that David did, he really did. You know, I think that there was a lot of hyperbole used in the telling of stories.

Question: About transubstantiation.

Well, first of all I respect Martin Marty, but I don't agree with him that transubstantiation is magical thinking. But there is a lot of magical thinking in people's minds. For example, when they think just by getting a sacrament, regardless of their faith, that it is going to do something. All sacraments are signs of faith, so they nurture faith. **Without faith sacraments mean nothing.** But as signs they really effect what they signify. Now **what does the body and blood of Christ signify?** Well, first of all it's **given as food.** Jesus gives us bread and wine as food, and when he gives it to us as food he says, "Take and eat; this is my body." Now what he is really doing is **he is defining or describing his death because he says, "This is my body given up for you."** So he is

describing **his death as a form of nourishment for his people**. Now I don't see how that is magic. He is talking about how he is going to nurture his people through his death. And the blood—he says, “Take and drink; this is my blood which is poured out for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven.” He is saying that **the blood he is going to pour out on the next day on the cross is really poured out for the forgiveness of sins**. But he is saying “Take and drink.” So if you have a Jewish understanding of the Passover and how the **Passover** is participating in this great liberation from slavery, and you see what Christ is saying: **this is a new liberation from the slavery to sin and a slavery to self; it's freeing you really to live without the fear of death and to live for God and to live in God**. And this is a power that I'm giving you from God—now that's not magic. That's the power of God.

Now the term “transubstantiation,” maybe we don't like that term. Maybe people don't understand that term. But what St. Thomas meant by that, which is accepted by the Council of Trent, is that it's no longer bread but the body, the blood, the soul, and the divinity of the living Christ. It's no longer wine. It looks like wine; the appearance of wine remains; the taste remains. The secondary effects of wine remain: if you drink too much, you get drunk. The effects of bread remain, the taste, everything about it. If it's stale, it's stale. See? If it's fresh, it's fresh. **But the substance, the reality, the basic what of the substance, that now is the living Christ, and he is communicating himself to us as food**. So I say, not magic, but mystery. It's **the mystery of how God touches us through sign**. I don't like the word “magic.” But magic does exist in people who think that receiving a sacrament regardless of their faith, regardless of their disposition, regardless of their attitude toward God, regardless of what they're doing in their daily lives, is going to do some good for them. See? So that is how I would answer that question. Any other questions?

Question: About exaggeration.

Well, your first question is about exaggeration. Yes, Christ exaggerated all kinds of things. They're called “parables.” A parable is by its nature an exaggeration. A point is drawn out to focus on something. Okay? So, yes, that's very basic to biblical literature; it's parabolic all over the place!

But the next question is: Did the Church use already existing feasts as their feasts? Yes, Passover—before it was a Jewish feast day, it was more or less a pagan holiday—the spring festival of the cutting of the barley, you know, matzoth. And the *pesach* had to do with the birth of the spring lambs. And then the Jews took those, you might say, pagan holidays, pagan feast days, and they made them a religious memorial of their experience of their liberation from slavery.

Christ used that to interpret his death. Now the truth was that the Jewish people looked forward to the coming of the Messiah during the Passover. They expected it. And Jesus was arrested during the Passover, so that all fits into their expectation. Now did the saving work of Jesus depend upon that? No, but that's how it happened. And so the early apostles, who of course were Jewish, of course kept the framework that it came in and simply reinterpreted it now as the Eucharistic words of Christ. It's the unleavened cake from the *matzoth*, and it's the *kiddush* cup from the Passover meal, now become the

bread and the wine which are the body and blood of Christ. So, yes, there are all these connections. And we still celebrate Easter when the Jews have Passover—we still do that.

Pentecost, the same. We have to understand that the coming of the Spirit cannot be limited to one day. Jesus, according to the gospels, gave the Spirit to the disciples the minute he saw them. In fact, John says when he died, he gave his breath: he was giving the Spirit. So Pentecost is a particular version found only in the Acts of the Apostles in which one specific day is emphasized. But actually **the gift of the Spirit comes with the resurrection and ascension of Christ**. And we just kind of mark it out liturgically: we have forty days of this, and then we have ten days of this, and then we have Pentecost. That's our liturgical style. We shouldn't think in terms of that's how it happened. See, very often this is a problem we get into: how it happened.

That's the next thing about what is history? Modern people have an idea of history that has nothing to do with ancient people's idea of history. We think history is about what happened, how it happened. It is not! That's not what history is about. History is really a story about significance. Winston Churchill wrote *The History of the English Speaking People*. Well, what do you think Winston did? Cut down the British? Ridicule the monarchy? Point out what a bunch of conceited people the British were? Do you think he did that? No! He talked about how great the British were, what magnificent gift to humanity these English people really are. Now that's called history, but it's English history. Now let's read Gandhi's version of the British in India. Same version? No! **They're both history, but they're two different versions.**

Muslims today—and the problem is —people don't get it—you know, the Muslims have a history of the world that is very different from ours, and we are not the good guys! And especially the British aren't the good guys. They had an empire in India until the British came. That was the beginning of the end of Muslim supremacy in India, and Muslim supremacy in many places. They had four great empires: Turkey; North Africa; Middle East, Arabia, Central Asia; India. In all four empires—gradually they lost all of them except a little bit of Saudi-Arabia. As far as Muslims go, even Iraq is not Islamic anymore, see, Saddam Hussein is not a practicing Muslim. Egypt isn't either. Those people aren't good Muslims. There are very few devout Muslim countries left. Iran, now, and Saudi-Arabia are Islamic countries. Afghanistan was, but now the U.S. took that over. So you see, in their history of the world—I mean, the West is undermining them, constantly undermining them. See, that's history. **It's not about what happens; it's about what it means, how to interpret it.**

Now the fact is Turkey fell under its own weight because it became so corrupt, but that's, well, that's one interpretation. You know, they became allies of Germany in World War I. After that the whole Ottoman Empire was cut up. By whom? The British and the French. So whom do they hate? Well, the Americans now because we're also English. So that's history.

Now the Bible as history is like that, too. But **the Bible is trying to tell about how God's relationship with a certain people fared**. It's not really telling the Jewish version, not really, not at all. First of all, I mean, if you really read the Bible, let's say the Old Testament in particular, but even the New Testament, I mean, who comes off really

looking good? Who? Who comes off looking really good? No, they did not! They had come out awful! And what about the apostles? Awful! Everybody comes off awful! I mean, read the Bible! Everyone is terrible! In the Old Testament there are only two kings who are really good—two kings: Hezekiah and Josiah, period!

David even, look what a disappointment he was! God did all this for him and then he goes and he steals Bathsheba and kills her husband. What a guy! Yes, I know; that made it all the worse! Made it worse. Oh, God can love anybody. God can love anyone. That's good news. It is good news; I mean, it is good news! I mean, **even the Old Testament is good news because God does not deal with people according to what he should, because if he did that, there would be nothing left.** That's basically one of the fundamental affirmations of the Old Testament. If God dealt with people according to their sins, there would be nobody around! See. Nobody is any good. The nations aren't good. The Jews aren't any good. Nobody is any good. Everybody is awful. They violate the covenant. No matter what God does, they're always countermanding. And if they're devout only for a while, then they give up; they get lukewarm.

And the apostles never understand anything Jesus does, never understand what he says. When he is really on trial, they all desert him. There is nobody who is any good except the Blessed Mother. In the New Testament the Blessed Mother is primarily the greatest. John the Baptist, well, he is pretty heroic; I mean, he never screws up. The beloved disciple remains loyal; he is a faithful follower. One, out of what? Seventy-five, eighty-some. So, I mean, you know, the Bible doesn't say much good about too many people. **It's really not about how good people are; it's about how God is persistent and how God has a plan and a purpose and now he is going to see it through.**

Question: About the Blessed Mother

Well, the Blessed Mother is held up in the New Testament as the first disciple of Christ, as the one who never deserts Jesus. She is held up as one who will be called blessed through all generations.

So let's go back into the idea of what is a story. **A story conveys all kinds of truths,** and that's what we have to understand. And take, for example, Jesus telling the story of the Good Samaritan. Now do you think for one minute, and I know you don't, but do you think that Jesus was really talking about an actual person who was a Samaritan? Of course not! The story of the Good Samaritan is telling you something about how to behave and what's important, what's really important in the mind of God, what is real justice in the mind of God. It's not about an actual person who was a Samaritan. And the same with the Prodigal Son. I mean, everyone knows this. But you see actually, although it's more obvious in the New Testament, **it's a general principle that biblical stories are told not to convey details about specific times and places, because that's irrelevant, but rather to talk about the meaning or the significance of what happens in life.** So that's a very important idea to get through.

And how would you talk about values or truths or intuitions or intimations, except by telling a story? Unfortunately, the modern idea of history as an accurate, eyewitness account of some event is not very useful in talking about the Bible for various reasons,

chief of which is the Bible is rarely written by an eyewitness. I'm not saying never. The gospel, at least the Gospel of John, is written by an eyewitness, or at least supported it, contributed to the production. But most of the time, especially in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, it's not written by people who are eyewitnesses to anything. So they're already receiving stories from the past.

Now what parts of these stories are accurate and what are not? That's a good question, and it will remain a good question. In this particular article in the US News and World Report, they mention a couple of things that this particular author was surprised to find out actually were accurate. For example, they point out that when it says in the Book of Genesis that Joseph was sold for twenty shekels, lo and behold, that was the price of a slave at that time; but later on it went up to 60, 80 and 120 shekels. So this says, well, they got the price right. So that's, of course, an indirect sort of thing. I think it's rather obvious however that, again, the story of Joseph or the Exodus or Adam or any of these are stories in which **the authors are trying to talk about transcendent values that today we would probably talk in abstract, philosophical, theological terms.**

So that's why we have to understand that when we talk about the **"literal sense" of a story, it means the meaning the author was trying to give it.** For example, the story of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: if you want to think of this as an actual tree with fruit, it would be a rather odd tree named the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I've never seen a tree like that, but we do use the term in our language, "tree of knowledge." And we use the snake as a symbol of knowledge, you know, this slithering snake going up whatever they call it in medical college, Caduceus. Have you ever seen it? They always have snakes. Why? It's symbolic. Now the author is trying to say, "Now look, human knowledge can lead us astray. Human knowledge is power and control. It can lead us astray." What is the original sin according to this story? Wanting to be equal to God because the serpent says to Eve, "Oh, Eve, you dope, God told you not to eat that fruit because if you do, you'll be equal to God; and he knows it and he doesn't want you to be equal to him. You can eat that fruit, come on!" And what is the fruit? It's knowledge. **So it's talking about how we can use our knowledge to do as we please, to determine what is good and evil. See, that's eating the fruit.** You eat something, you make it a part of yourself. We determine what is good and what is evil. **We ignore God, and that makes us equal to God; and that gives us power over life. And that is the greatest trap than anyone can fall into; that's the original sin.** That's what the story is talking about. Now if people foolishly think, well, actually it's about a garden and it's about a tree and it's about a snake that talks, they're going to miss the whole point. And sadly, this has often happened. See?

Question: Is that pride that has led to original sin?

Absolutely—absolutely.

So the modern idea has to be put in its place, and we have to get back into the literal sense, meaning the understanding the author had; and that is not too easy to get to. And this has been admitted by, for example, Pope Pius XII in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, written in 1943. Later, various decrees of the Biblical Commission have said that in order to get the literal sense you really have to have a knowledge first of all of the ancient languages,

and not only the languages but the literature and the genre, meaning the way people talk. You know, as you go back into literature you find there are different kinds of stories used to convey different kinds of purposes, different kinds of meanings. All that's important. You have to get in touch with all of it to get to the literal sense in the first place, and that's the historical sense. And Thomas Aquinas calls the literal sense "*sensus historicus*." Now *historicus* sounds to us historical, but he doesn't mean that. He means the sense of the story, just as the word "history" has got "hi" and then "story"—his story—history—history comes from story. **So we have to get back to the ancient idea of what a story is; that's history in a biblical sense.**

So then to summarize let me repeat: the historical sense and the literal sense refer to the **original intent of the author**, and this may or may not be readily available. And this relates to issues of, number one, language; **translations are never perfect**. Translations are never perfect. Just go to the library and read three or four different translations and you'll see they give different colorings. There are different texts in terms of the original manuscripts. There are just so many manuscripts available, but they're not exactly identical. So we have to decide what's the best. That's called "textual criticism." Then there's culture. We have to learn about **ancient cultures, habits of people**.

What did Jesus mean in today's gospel when he said, "My yoke is sweet"? What does that mean? Have any idea? (Various answers.) Yoke is in relationship to a plow, but it is also used metaphorically. But yoking also is used metaphorically of a slave; a slave was said to be yoked to a master. Okay? Now some masters were very difficult to work for, to be a slave of. And it is a matter of working for them. You were bonded to them; you couldn't leave. I mean, it's not like, well, I'm quitting! Well, no, you're not; you're a slave. So the idea is that Jesus is saying, "Well, if you take me on as your master, I'm going to give you some work to do, but it will be easy. I am not going to be a hard taskmaster. 'My yoke is easy, my burden light.'"

Now I read that in Aramaic, that is, Chaldean, modern-day Iraqi theologians—and there are Catholics in Iraq, you know; they don't follow the Roman Rite; they follow the Chaldean Rite, one of the Eastern Rites—and he claims that the reason that the Church came and abolished polygamy, a man having more than one wife, was this doctrine, this statement, "My yoke is easy, my burden light," because they said if following Christ is supposed to be easy, then those who are slaves are going to be working themselves to death to care for this huge family. That's what he claims. Now I don't know if that's true or not. He is Iraqi, but from his point of view, from his history, he claims that's what they say over in Iraq of why monogamy is important, because polygamy is abusive to the servant class because it puts a burden on people that is unfair because, of course, kids never work. The kids of the rich don't work, and the rich should have only the children they can have with one wife. That's enough of a burden for the world. That's what he says. Now it's up to you to take it or leave it. I'm just giving you an example of culture, of a **cultural coloring of the meaning of a text**. So when he reads that, that's what he reads. Now I would have never, ever, ever come to that idea; if I had sat meditating on that text for a thousand years, it would have never occurred to me it had anything to do with slaves and servants and burdens and kids. It wouldn't have occurred to me!

Then there is also the **history of the text**. For example, if you read Matthew and Luke, you can see that they have some things—they share some material. And then you can see that some things Matthew, Luke, and Mark share, but some things Mark doesn't have that Luke and Matthew have. So that's part of the history. Well, how do they share this?

And then the **oral form**. Well, we know that before the gospels were written down they were preached, and we know that before the Old Testament was ever written there were long recitals, oral, memorized. So what about that? Can we find out anything about the oral forms? And **we believe that the actual form of some of the Scripture is actually written precisely the way it is because of the way that people had to remember it before they wrote it down**. So I don't know if you ever do anything like that. Do you ever use tricks, memory tricks? Well, that can affect the form of how you say something.

Editing. Well, we know the Scriptures were edited. The Old Testament obviously, but the New Testament as well, the Fourth Gospel. You can see Jesus says some things, and then he says them all over again but slightly different; well, that's called "editing." Now how do you find this? Well, **the Church's view is basically that the literal sense is the final form**. Well, what about the previous form? Well, it's part of it; it's part of what went into making the final form. And the Holy Spirit must be involved in the whole process. You can't say, well, the Holy Spirit was only at the oral level or the Holy Spirit was only at the final level or the Holy Spirit was only in the middle. No, **the Holy Spirit has to be everywhere touching all of it; and it all ends up in the literal sense**. And the truth of the matter is this will be a lifetime of research to get into all these areas.

Furthermore, in the early Church the Fathers of the Church said that, well, there's another sense besides the literal; they called it the "**spiritual sense**." Some in particular liked this idea, not all—and especially liked it in regard to the Old Testament, especially the Psalms. They said that, well, we can interpret the Psalms referring to Christ. Well, of course, they were written way before Christ. Well, oh no, they said that they refer to Christ. "Blessed is he who trusts in the Lord"—"Blessed is the man"—it says "the man who trusts in the Lord." That word "man," male person, they said, "How come it says male person?" Well, because it's referring to Christ. That's why. Okay, that's called the "spiritual sense" of Scripture. And because of that the Psalms were brought into a lot of Christian liturgy; if you notice, our breviary, our Mass, has **a lot of Psalms used in this spiritual sense where it is interpreted as referring to Christ**.

There's also something called a "**sensus plenior**." That has to do with **how ideas, doctrines, grow and develop**. Plenior—it simply means **fuller**. It's not very important. It's not a good word. Now a lot of people don't like that idea, *sensus plenior*, today. I'll give you an example. For example, in Isaiah it says, "A virgin shall conceive." Well, actually the word "alma" doesn't really mean virgin, I mean, it could mean virgin; it could mean any young girl. Young girls are supposed to be virgins, so "alma" is a young girl who is a virgin—or not. It's a generic word. But now we always say, "Oh, that refers to virgin because it refers to Mary." Well, in its original it didn't; it referred to somebody else, a young girl who was conceiving right there; I mean, the prophet is pointing to somebody. Later on the Christians said, "Oh, but that refers to Mary, who is a virgin who

conceives. So that's a *sensus plenior*, a fuller sense, **a reinterpretation of the Old Testament.**

Now Clement of Alexandria gives even more senses: literal sense, *sensus plenior*, he gives more. I also mentioned spiritual sense. Here are some: doctrinal sense, prophetic sense, philosophical sense, mystical sense. Okay? All these different senses he found in the Scriptures. Now most modern-day theologians don't like to use this type of terminology, but I actually like it. I think I was born at the wrong time, or something; I like the old approach. But anyway, the bottom line is that the biblical authors are not so much interested in telling their audience what happened. They're trying to tell their audience **the meaning of what happened, the significance of what happened, the doctrinal significance, the prophetic significance, the philosophical significance, the mystical significance.** You understand that? Now do you want me to flesh this out or do you want me to go on? If I flesh it out, I mean go on in this area and explain it more deeply—or do you just want to go on to something else?

Question: About what is the meaning.

Now here, that's a very good point. Let's take three things: the **Exodus** event, whatever that was; the **birth of Christ**; and the **death of Christ on the cross.** Now let's look at them in terms of what happened.

The first one, **the Exodus, what happened?** Well, we don't really know what happened. What the Bible says happened is 600,000 people got up and left Egypt and went on a journey for forty years, and they camped in Kadesh-barnea thirty-nine years, and then finally went into Palestine. That's what it says. Along the way all these other things happened.

Now is that plausible? Well, in my view, and in the view of almost everyone, no; 600,000 is too many people. I mean, if you want to be Cecile B. DeMille and you want to have this fabulous cast, well, good for you, but you have to think about reality. Is there any sign that 600,000 people ever lived in the land of Goshen? No. I mean, that's just too enormous. Israel in the sixth century BC, fifth century BC, Israel didn't have more than 60,000 people. How could they have had 600,000 people three hundred years earlier? See what I mean? There's a problem here. It just seems too exaggerated. Did somebody leave? Maybe. I mean, I read somebody said 6,000. Another one said 600. **Well, it doesn't really matter because the experience of this group became the experience of the entire congregation—see—by sharing it.**

And there are some basic, you might say, **principles or teachings that story tells us about.** And I will get it for you right here as soon as I find it—here it is. Number one, here's what the story of the Exodus says no matter how many people were involved. **God cares about those deprived of justice. Now is that news? It sure is in the ancient Near East!** For all intents and purposes God was the government. If you read the myths that the people had, the myths are all talking about how the gods established this particular government with this particular ruler, and therefore whatever happens is under the authority of this particular god. And if this particular ruler loses a battle to another ruler, then that myth is pushed away and a new myth becomes the reigning myth. But

what this story says is, no, God cares about those deprived of justice, including serfs or slaves, landless peasants.

Number two, **God has ways of influencing human history**—mysterious ways—but he has ways of influencing human history. **But human beings are also players on the stage of life**—also a new teaching, because the myths of the ancient Near East all seem to lead to the view that most people were just pawns and puppets. There was no freedom. It’s actually the gods, supernatural beings, that determined everything and how it happened.

And the ruling elite were the chosen friends of the supernatural powers. This says, no. People make decisions, and those **decisions either cooperate with or counteract the plan and purpose of God**. In the case of pharaoh, this powerful man, his decisions contradicted the plan of God.

Fourthly, **God is revealed as “I AM WHO AM,”** which is a very powerful theological and philosophical idea. It means that God is the **ground of all consciousness**—“I AM WHO AM.” And we haven’t actually plumbed the depths of that revelation. It is God’s nature to be aware. And our ability to be aware and to have a feeling of “I” is only because we are in some way a reflection of this divine being who made us in his own image and likeness. When we live a mechanical life devoid of consciousness, devoid of awareness, pushed here and there by the events of life, we are unworthy: we are living an unworthy life, and we have dethroned ourselves from the place God placed us in his creation, and we have become ungodly.

Fifth, **God is the origin of all law and order** because that’s the whole idea of the covenant. Man has no business making laws up, just like Eve had no business eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. That’s making up things. And human beings, human society, has no business inventing laws. We’re supposed to take the laws God gives us.

Sixth, **human beings have a covenant obligation to follow God’s law and not invent their own**.

Seven, **the special relationship that the chosen people have to God is one of being a paradigm of justice and a just society**.

So the story of the Exodus is really telling that. It tells it in a way that, to our eyes at least, if you ever think of it very much, is extremely improbable—this humongous people under one director with no telephones! Later on these other totally improbable stories—like the golden calf! Aaron supposedly fashioned a golden calf—with what tools? Did he bring a workshop with him, anvils and everything? I mean, see, you have to take—but what is that about? It’s about future unfaithfulness. And the story is saying, “Look at it: from the very beginning you never understood what your real responsibilities are.” So anyway, so you have to get to the literal meaning. Okay. So that’s Exodus.

Now take **the crucifixion of Christ**. From a purely historical viewpoint what is there to say? By purely historical I mean, okay, CNN is there, okay. What are they going to see? He died. Right. But the gospel wants to tell you more than that. They want to tell

you the meaning of this, that **the death of Jesus was actually the moment when divine mercy entered into the human race, was accepted, and became now the source of all salvation for all generations—past and present and future.** And so they say, well, Jesus descended into hell, took the souls of the just to heaven, and so on. Those are ways of talking about **the significance of what happened.**

Now in this book here mentions some things about crucifixion and there is another thing I gave to—that’s a very interesting article called “The Physical Death of Jesus: A Medical Study.” This is very interesting. But this in itself, although it might fascinate a believer, will never convince an unbeliever because it’s not about faith. It’s about physics. But biblical history is about faith, not about physics. So of course Jesus died on the cross—no doubt about that.

But when it says, “**The curtain is rent from top to bottom,**” it’s saying that the division between God, whom the Jews believed resided in the inner sanctum of the holy of holies—and they believed that only the high priest once a year could enter into that holy of holies with the blood of the Yom Kippur sacrifice—that **separation of God from people is over.** That’s what it means. The reality of the curtain—did the actual curtain get ripped? Well, I don’t know. I wasn’t there. But I remember a great homily by a Scottish Presbyterian, and he talked about how “the ripping of the temple curtain,” and he says, “and they got out their sewing and they started mending it immediately.” And that, of course, is not part of the story, but it does tell you something. It tells you that they weren’t interested in this openness. Okay, now I got lost! What time is it? One more point.

I don’t know if you have ever noticed, but every Christmas you hear the stories of **Jesus’ birth.** Okay, now here again, what happened? He was born. That’s the history from a modern point of view. Well, what’s the significance of this?

Well, according to Luke, Mary and Joseph were not married, but Mary was pregnant; and they were living in—where? Where were they living? Nazareth. And they couldn’t stay there. They had to go somewhere. Where did they have to go? (Bethlehem.) Why? Census. Okay. Now from the standpoint of world history—problem! The census was not in any year before the birth of Christ. There was no census at that time. The first census of the world was after the time of Christ. (Comments.) Not to my knowledge. That’s another thing, now. We don’t actually know everything. So maybe there was one, but from what I read, no. But here is the point: Luke says that they are living in Nazareth, but they have to go to Bethlehem. Why? Because the Messiah was to be born in the City of David. The Messiah had to be born in the City of David. So they had to get to Bethlehem. Okay, so here’s the story. Now after the child was born, what did they do? They went home to Nazareth and Jesus became a Nazorean. Right? That’s what it says. That’s the story. When they went to Bethlehem, of course, there was no room in the inn, so where did they stay? In a stable.

Now Matthew tells the story very differently. People actually don’t realize it’s a different story. In Matthew’s version Mary and Joseph live—where? In Bethlehem. They are already in Bethlehem. They don’t go there. They live there. And Mary becomes pregnant and Joseph is there; and he is going to put her away, but, no, he doesn’t because

he listens to an angel. And then who shows up but—from Persia? Who comes from Persia? Three Magi come. Maybe it doesn't even say three, but Magi come from the East. And they inquire from Herod, "Okay, where is the newborn king of the Jews?" And Herod says, "Oh, am I happy there is a newborn king of the Jews! I want to come and worship him." And they say, "Sure, as soon as we find him." And so they follow a star. Now this is really, I mean, extremely far-fetched. Have you ever found a house under a star? I mean, let's face it! There are lots of houses under any star. So, okay, then they find the house—and it's a house; it's not a stable, correct? In the text it says house. "And they enter the house where the child was." And they give the gifts and they leave. And the angel says to them, "Don't tell Herod. Go back by another route." Then an angel comes to Joseph and says, "Take the child. Herod wants to do him harm. Go to Egypt." So he does. And after a while, Herod dies. And the angel goes to Joseph and says, "Now you may take the child and return. But don't go"—where? Home. "Don't go home, because you can't trust Herod's son Archelaus." Where are you supposed to go? Well, he is not really told where to go; but he goes to heathen Galilee, which is where Nazareth is.

So what do they agree on? They agree that Jesus ends up in Nazareth. They agree that he was born in Bethlehem. That's all they agree on! Okay? But why—what's the point of all this? Everyone of them is saying something in a different way. Luke is trying to point out how **from the very beginning Jesus identifies with the poor**. He has no place to live. The shepherds are his only companions. But he does go to Bethlehem because he is of the House of David.

And for Matthew's part he recognizes and expresses that even the **foreign nations**, the Persians, **acknowledge the divinity**, actually. What do they bring? They bring three gifts. That's where the three comes from. Gold, frankincense, myrrh. What is gold, frankincense, and myrrh put together? Gold is a censer, and the myrrh and the frankincense are burned in the censer. It's a sign of honor, worship. So those are symbols of worship. So **they come with symbols of worship**. And what does Herod do? **Herod tries to kill the child**.

Now are we talking about the events that actually happened, or are we talking about **the significance of the meaning of Christ's birth**? Well, I think we are talking about the significance of Christ's birth. And if you look at what I mentioned before, St. Clement and his different levels, we can see them.

First of all, **prophecy**. What's the prophetic meaning of this? Not that Herod actually killed some children, but that **government and state would attempt to destroy Christ and his Church**. They always have; they always will! It's a prophetic statement about the jeopardy that is involved in this great event. And it is also prophetic that later on when Jesus dies that it is **another Herod that hands him over to Pilate, sends him back to Pilate**.

Philosophical meaning. What's the **philosophical** meaning? Well, throughout the Old Testament there is this question of what is the **proper role of authority**? And there is this constant question. In the story of Jesus and Herod there is criticism of the very idea that there should be a union between religion and politics, although it was very common

in the ancient world. I'm saying the story is talking about **the danger of mixing religion and politics**.

Mystical point of view. How can the virgin birth of Jesus be seen as something that speaks to all people in their need for rebirth? The idea of birth from a virgin is **birth from nothing**. You understand? Nothing natural. And really this is a mystical way of talking about Baptism, because in **Baptism** we are reborn not from our parents but from the grace of God, the same grace that infused the womb of the Blessed Mother and brought about Jesus in the first place.

“Vatican II teaches that the books of sacred Scripture . . . teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.” I will read it again. “Vatican II teaches that the books of sacred Scripture . . . teaching, firmly, faithfully, and without error that **the truth which God wanted—the truth which God wanted—put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.**” That phrasing is very important. Now it's important that we do not jump the gun and decide ahead of time what that is, but prayerfully seek it as we study the Bible.

Question: Will you read that again?

What part? The whole quotation? “Concerning the Scriptures the Vatican II says the books of sacred Scripture . . . teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation”. So the truth that is being spoken is a truth that God wants there for our salvation. **So you cannot beg the question by bringing to the Bible a preconceived idea of what that is.** And ultimately it is the Church that teaches what that is. And it teaches what that is through its normal way of teaching faith, creed, catechism, and so on. Okay? Any other questions? I think it's a long night. You have been very attentive. Well, thanks for coming.

¹Sheler, Jeffrey. “Is the Bible True?” *US News and World Report*, 127 (16) (October 25, 1999), 50-59.