



# MISSIONARIES OF THE HOLY TRINITY

## “LIVING IN THE DIVINE WILL”

Special Edition 2014



### HOW GOD REVEALS HIMSELF TO THE PROPHETS

In being asked to share with you the dynamic of God’s self-revelation to mankind through his prophets (today’s “mystics”), I was reminded of Jesus’ words: *“I give praise to you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and learned you have revealed them to the childlike”* (Mt. 11:25). This truth is reflected in St. Paul’s epistle: *“God has chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise”* (1 Cor. 1:27).

Throughout Scripture it is abundantly clear that God’s special predilection for the childlike is predicated on their docility to the Spirit of God, the revealer of “all the truth” (Jn. 16:13). The Holy Spirit tenderly reveals to God’s

prophets the Father’s spoken Word, the Son of God, who leads them back to the Father. Accordingly, the Triune God reveals himself to the prophets and leads them to a *kenosis*, a self-emptying. Paul relates that Christ *“emptied himself and took the form of a slave”* (Phil. 2:7). Christ’s human nature emptied itself in order to receive the fullness of the divinity (which fullness he always possessed in his divine Person), and he did so to set an example, especially to his prophets, for all to follow. Much like a flute that cannot pipe a sweet tune unless it is empty, the childlike are invited to empty themselves of their own will in order to be filled with the divinity and proclaim God’s Word. Among the childlike whom God has chosen to proclaim his Word, noteworthy are Ss. Catherine of Siena, Bernadette of Lourdes, Faustina Kowalska, the Servant of God Luisa Piccarreta, the shepherd children of Fatima, etc.

In presenting my doctoral thesis in Rome in the fields of mystical and dogmatic theology, I was asked to explain *how* an infallible God may reveal his inerrant Word through the imperfect instrumentality of a human being, namely the prophet. After having scoured the writings of the mystical doctors of the Church, one sobering truth emerged: The *substance* (content) of God’s divinely revealed Word is not compromised by the *formal* (grammatical) inaccuracies of its author, namely the prophet. To better illustrate this truth, consider two aspects of prophetic revelation: The prophet’s “setting in life” and “intentionality”.

## Setting in Life

The prophet's "setting in life" (*sitz im leben*) is the reader's awareness of the prophet's cultural milieu that influenced the prophet's writings. Here one discovers the circumstances, environment and religious ethos of the life of the community in which the prophet wrote. Indeed, Pope Pius XII exhorted those entrusted with extrapolating the meaning a prophetic text, to acknowledge the inspired writer as "the living and reasonable instrument of the Holy Spirit" who uses the writer's "faculties and powers", so as to "better understand what the inspired author wishes to express" (POPE PIUS XII, Encyclical Letter, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, 33-34).

In point of fact, in all prophetic literature the education that influenced the prophets' grammatical *form* and reflected the culture of their day, is consistent with similar influences that acted upon the Old and New Testament writers. The very books of Sacred Scripture, although guaranteed as divinely inspired, contain many grammatical *forms* that are properly seen and interpreted only through the author's setting in life. Some examples may be found in the author of the Book of Genesis who reveals that "the sky is a dome" (Gen. 1:8,15); in the author of the Book of Samuel who relates that "the earth has pillars" (1 Sam. 2 :8); in the Psalmist who affirms that the earth has "ends" (Ps. 48:11); in the Gospel of John who appears to confound the Father with the Son: "The Father and I are one" (Jn. 10:30). Other examples of grammatical form may be found in certain prophecies, such as that of Jonah 3:4, where the prophet says that Nineveh will be destroyed in 40 days, but it wasn't destroyed. When read within the proper context, or setting in life, one soon discovers Jonah's exhortation was conditional, i.e., Nineveh would be destroyed *on the condition* that its inhabitants should fail to repent.



Accordingly, in presenting the writings of the prophets, one must refrain from interpreting the pure letter (*ad litteram*), but peer into the meaning and the *intention* behind their written word. This is achieved by interpreting in light of the Deposit of Faith the prophetic revelation, which, while adding nothing to the one Public Revelation of Jesus Christ, explicates his one Revelation in a new time and setting.

## Intentionality

It may come as a shock to some that nearly all mystical literature contains grammatical errors (*form*) and, on occasion, doctrinal error (*substance*). Although in some passages of their writings, the prophets may have written something doctrinally erroneous, a cross-reference of their writings reveals that such doctrinal errors were "unintentional". In my doctoral dissertation that is approved by the University of Rome and authorized by the Holy See, it is theologically demonstrated that the very errors that were initially discovered in many prophetic texts that were later approved, are elsewhere contradicted with sound doctrinal truths by the same prophets and in the same prophetic texts. Admittedly, such errors, when theologically demonstrated as unintentional, are removed from the text before it is approved and published. This

notwithstanding, many a critic has erred in condemning a prophet for a theological error without having first cross-referenced said text, or without having read the text in its entirety. True theology is not a matter of pure literary critique; it is above all receptivity to the prophetic text that – if faithful to the Deposit of Faith – reveals the face of Christ, the Word of the Father, whom the reader contemplates.

Now, such errors in prophetic writings are due to the visions or the knowledge the prophet receives from God that, while passing through human the filter, undergo some modification. After all, God does not come down from heaven and write for the prophet, but he avails himself of the prophet's hand, free will, intellect, etc. God never imposes his will on the prophet, but gently invites the prophet to follow his Divine Will. Indeed, everything God reveals is received through and according to the subject's dispositions. In the history of prophetic revelation it is not uncommon that the prophet's limited and imperfect human nature is impacted by a psychological, moral or spiritual event that may hinder the spiritual enlightenment of God's revelation from shining perfectly in the prophet's soul, whereby the prophet's perception of the revelation is involuntarily altered. A prophet's unintentional errors may also occur on account of the prophet not having written down God's divinely revealed truths until days, weeks, months, if not years after they were received from God. This explains why Luisa Piccarreta omitted dates to many of her revelations in Volume 1, including the date of her *Spiritual Marriage of the Cross*, and having admitted to not recalling the chronology of events in her "Notebook of Childhood Memories". Such influences as these modify the transmission of God's revelation. It is little wonder therefore that unintentional errors are found in the writings of the saints whom the Church venerates on her altars, and who contradict each other, e.g., Ss. Brigitte of Sweden, Mary of Agreda, Catherine Emmerich, etc.



Unfortunately, history reveals that such errors were not always removed before the prophetic texts were published, which errors, St. Hannibal di Francia maintains, produce spiritual harm in the reader. St. Hannibal founded the Rogationist Fathers and the Sisters of Divine Zeal, and he was the spiritual director of many mystics, including the seer of La Salette, Melanie Calvat, and the Italian mystic, Luisa Piccarreta. In the following passage he emphasizes the importance of the Church's "learned writers", that is, theologians who are to remove such errors before the prophetic revelation is published and read by the faithful. In a letter to Fr. Peter Bergamaschi who had published all the *unedited* writings of a renowned Benedictine mystic, St. M. Cecilia of Montefiascone (1694-1766), Hannibal criticizes his decision to publish them:

*"Conforming to prudence and sacred accuracy, people cannot deal with private revelations as if they were canonical books or decrees of the Holy See. Even the most enlightened persons, especially women, may be greatly mistaken in the visions, revelations, locutions, and inspiration. More*

*than once has the divine operation been restrained by human nature. For example, who could ratify in full all the visions of Catherine Emmerich and St. Brigitte, which show evident discrepancies? I love the private revelations of holy persons, but I never accept everything.*

*Were I to publish revelations, I would eliminate or revise what is inconsistent with a sound criterion, or reliable tradition, or opinions of sacred, learned writers. I think of behaving prudently...*

*My dear father, to consider any expression of the private revelations as dogma or propositions near of faith is always imprudent!... This is proved by experience, by the mystical theologians, such as St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa, Castrotevere, Poulain, etc... We cannot consider their revelations and the locutions as words of Scripture. Some of them must be omitted, and others explained in a right, prudent meaning."*

In light of the preceding, a dialectic emerges between the prophet and the theologian. The prophet explains to the theologian the nature and meaning of the

visions, knowledge and expressions that come from God, while the theologian helps qualify them in light of Church doctrine for publication, i.e., through annotations or other textual modifications. If the theologian occupies the role of reviewing the writings of the prophet in light of the Deposit of Faith, he does so through the guidance of the prophet whom God especially enlightens on the meaning of his prophetic Word. If all theologians adopted this approach, it would certainly hasten the day in which the Church accords the prophets the place of prominence Paul gave them and that they enjoyed in the early Church.

I conclude with the words of St. Paul: "And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God..." (Eph. 4:11-13).

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