ON READING THE BIBLE AS SCRIPTURE, ENCOUNTERING THE CHURCH

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ABSTRACT. As an exercise in the ‘theology of disclosure’, the present essay proposes a kind of phenomenological analysis of the act of reading the Bible as Scripture with the goal of bringing to light the theoretical commitments which it implicitly demands. This sort of analysis can prove helpful for the continuing disputes among Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox insofar as it is relevant for one of the principal points of controversy between them: namely, the relationship between Scripture, Tradition, and Church as theological authorities. It proceeds by analyzing both the objective and subjective ‘poles’ of the act, and it illuminates the presence of the Church and her Tradition on both sides. The Church—i.e., the community of God’s people—is both that which is immediately encountered in the text, as well as the factor which enables scriptural reading in the first place. The article terminates with an application of the insights of the preceding discussion to the controversy about icons.

KEYWORDS: phenomenology of Scripture, Tradition, Bible, ecclesiology, icons

Preliminary Remarks on the Phenomenology of Scripture

The quincentenary of the Protestant Reformation invites careful reflection on persistent divisions which characterize Christian existence in the modern world. Though typically the disputes between Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox are often addressed hermeneutically, through the careful interpretation of particular critical passages, there is a prior question to be answered, one which promises fruit for the resolution of the seemingly interminable exegetical debates. In spite of critical differences of opinion regarding the interpretation of the sacred texts, Christians of all stripes are nevertheless united by this: they read the Bible as Scripture, as being the Word of God and not a mere collection of books. This common inheritance contains potential for effecting unity (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 21, in Second Vatican Council 2014: 187). But the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* deems Scripture to be the sole infallible source by reference to which all others are

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judged, granting only a certain limited theological authority to the Tradition of the Church [see Vanhoozer's chapter in Levering (2017), as well as Vanhoozer (2016, chapter 3)]. Collins and Walls (2017) present with especial clarity the Protestant perspective that each reader of Scripture is 'equidistant' from the Word of God, so that no one person is privileged merely because she is an important figure in the tradition. Catholic and Orthodox approaches, on the other hand, tend to blend Scripture, Tradition, and Church into a single perichoretic triad, as it were [*Dei Verbum* II.7-10, in Second Vatican Council: 293-5; Stăniloae (2010); Mănăstireanu (2006)]. The matter to be investigated in this essay is whether, if the intellectual commitments implicit in the act of reading the Bible as Scripture can be brought to light through a careful 'phenomenological' analysis, it may help also to clarify and distinguish the respective merits of differing approaches to the question of Scripture's relative spiritual authority.

Scriptural reading is an important spiritual practice for Christians. It is a way of coming into contact with God, because the ascription of divine inspiration to the texts is essential to the notion of 'scripture' *per se*: 'All scripture is inspired by God' (2 Timothy 3:16). Not only does the reader take herself to be taught the truth, but through scriptural reading she is also sanctified by God's grace, being lifted up onto a rock that is otherwise out of her reach (Psalm 61:2)—put another way, she is deified by it (cf. 2 Peter 1:4). The essay will proceed by an analysis of both the objective and subjective 'poles' of the act of reading the Bible as Scripture. The lesson to be learned in the end is this: even if the scriptural reader hopes to encounter God in the Bible, she certainly comes into contact with the Church, with the community of God's people as a whole; indeed, it is the Church which makes it possible for her to read the Bible as Scripture in the first place, so that the two are seen to be inseparable. An understanding which proposes a separation of these sources, on the other hand, would seem to represent a departure from 'the things themselves' and appears to fall victim to the charge of motivated reasoning. The essay consequently terminates with an application of these insights in defense of the religious use of icons, a controversy which continues to prove divisive among Christians and is directly connected to the question of theological authority.

The present essay is part of a greater project dedicated to the development of a phenomenology of Scripture. But what is offered here is not a 'phenomenology of Scripture' *per se*, understood as a *genitivus objectivus*, i.e. a phenomenological analysis whose object is Scripture. This is because there is a distinction between Scripture and the biblical text [Nemes 2017; see also Legaspi (2010)]. 'Scripture', as was noted, is used to refer to texts which are taken to be of divine origin. A phenomenology of Scripture would be concerned to investigate that experience, if there is any such experience, in

which the divine quality of the text comes to light. The phenomenological approaches of Flood (2006) and Sokolowski (2017) would seem to be unaware of this difference, which will be explained further below. In any case, it should be quite uncontroversial that the Bible does not disclose its true nature as Scripture—i.e. as the Word of God and not a mere collection of books—each time a person sits down to read it in the faith that it is such. Consequently, a phenomenology of Scripture *sensu stricto* is still forthcoming. The present analysis, on the other hand, is concerned with the reader's approach of the biblical texts as Scripture. It offers an important contribution towards a phenomenology of Scripture insofar as it analyzes the act of reading the Bible as Scripture, which typically establishes the context in which Scripture gives itself to be seen by its reader.

What does 'phenomenology' mean in the present context? Phenomenology, in the famous words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, conceives of philosophy as 'relearning to look at the world' (2002: xxiii; cf. Westphal 2009: 266). It is 'the study of human experience and of the way things present themselves to us in and through experience' (Sokolowski 2000: 2). Its principal method is the phenomenological reduction, without which no one can be a phenomenologist (Taminiaux 2004: 9). The present essay proceeds in the spirit of the phenomenological philosophy of Robert Sokolowski, who emphasizes the intrinsic connection between the *natural attitude*, which is defined as 'the focus we have when we are involved in our original, world-directed stance, when we intend things, situations, facts, and any other kind of objects', and the *phenomenological attitude*, which is 'the focus we have when we reflect upon the natural attitude and all the intentionalities that occur within it' (Sokolowski 2000: 42). Phenomenology is therefore 'second-order' contemplative reflection on acts of consciousness considered as such, though for Sokolowski this does not mean that phenomenology has nothing to say about being (Sokolowski 2000: 14). The phenomenological reduction serves the function of bringing back ('re-duc-ing') to consciousness the variegated way in which human beings are related to the world precisely through the temporary suspension of that engagement (Merleau-Ponty 2002: xiv-xv). It is 'a way of becoming aware of where we are in the world', in the words of Levinas (in Simmons and Benson 2013: 60). The present essay can be thought of as a kind of 'phenomenological' investigation of the act of reading the Bible as Scripture, though it does not engage in this act with perfect phenomenological purity, because it also raises theological questions. Putting phenomenology to the service of Christian theology, it therefore constitutes an exercise in what Sokolowski calls the 'theology of disclosure', a kind of phenomenological theology that takes up 'the task of describing how the Christian things taught by the Church and studied by speculative theology come to light' (1994: 7).

The Bible as Object

There would be much to say about the nature of the Bible as object of the act of scriptural reading, but the most important aspect to be noted in this context is its essential artifactuality: it is a textual object and thus an artifact, a product of human activity, subject as such to the exigencies of artifactual existence. A particularly significant consequence of the Bible's artifactuality is this: whereas the scriptural reader explicitly anticipates an encounter with God in its pages, she also and certainly comes into profound contact with the Church, the community of the people of God, from whom the Bible shows itself to be essentially inseparable. This is because all artifacts mediate encounters with their artificers, to whom they are inextricably connected.

An artifact is distinguished from a natural substance in the following way: the distinctly artifactual intelligibility of an artifact, i.e. that which can be understood about it precisely insofar as it is an artifact, is imposed upon it from without by an artificer, whereas the intelligibility of a natural substance is proper and intrinsic to it. A further consequence of this is that the essential unity of the elements of an artifact, in virtue of which unity it exists in the first place, is not natural to its parts; they must be assembled through human agency in order to function as they do (Feser 2014: 164-71; Sokolowski 2008: 109). Thus, there is no natural tendency in paper and ink to unite in such a manner as to produce a text; for this, the unifying activity of the author is necessary. And the intelligibility of the artifact—in the case of a text, this intelligibility would perhaps consist mostly in the meaning of what is written—is imposed upon it by the artificer, existing first in the mind of the author and later coming to be 'embodied' in the textual artifact. Another example: a piece of music first exists in the mind of its composer, and later comes to be 'embodied' in a live performance or in sheet music.

The anthropogenic origin of artifactual intelligibility grounds the potential for a genuine encounter of the artificer in every interaction with an artifact. Human beings typically do what they do because they judge it good and worthwhile to do so, whence it results that an artifact communicates, in some measure, the concerns and interests of the artificer, in addition to demonstrating her capabilities as such. In this way, the artifact embodies the mind of its creator. For instance, the jazz guitar stylings of Pat Metheny may express something of a positive and optimistic perspective through their lively brightness, in addition to demonstrating clearly his capacity as a guitar virtuoso. On the other hand, a graffito, which is a textual artifact of sorts, can reveal the reprobate character of its author, particularly if it is vulgar or obscene, as well as her capacity as an author, if it is ungrammatical or lacking in wit. And because the intelligibility of an artifact has its origins in the mind of its artificer, properly understanding it implies assuming the mind of the artificer as much as this is possible. What does this 'assumption

of mind' consist in? In order to understand a piece composed by Pat Metheny, for example, it is necessary to gain his knowledge of the principles of music theory, jazz harmony, guitar theory, and the rest, so that the structure of the piece as his creation, as well as the choices he made in its composition, can be understood. Grasping the intelligibility of an artifact implies 'thinking the thoughts of the artificer after her', so to speak, just as scientists studying the natural world can be said to be thinking God's thoughts after Him (Ratzinger 2004: 153).

Now, artifacts typically do not occupy the peripheral space of some domain of knowledge; they do not occur at the surface but are found rather in the depths, presupposing a sophisticated grasp of the relevant domain. Because of this 'distance', an artifact is not capable of communicating its intelligibility to the otherwise ignorant person. Some initiatory education into the relevant domain, a 'catechesis' of sorts, is necessary for the intelligibility of the artifact to be disclosed. Marion appreciates this point when he says that equipment (e.g., a computer)—a particular sort of artifact—can only appear as such (or, in other words, their artifactual intelligibility is only disclosed) 'on condition that that they are tended to by a consciousness well-versed in them ... and especially one who knows his way around them and gives himself over to them unreservedly' (2002: 127-8). To continue with the previous examples, the music of Pat Metheny was not composed on the basis of only the most elementary notions of music theory, but rather from a profound grasp and mastery of the relevant material, so that even the most zealous student will not be able to grasp it in its fullness after only her first half-year of studies. Even more clearly, listening to the music of Pat Metheny again and again without any study whatsoever will not make it considerably more intelligible for the listener *specifically as an artifact*, in the same way that poring over the pages of a book written in a foreign alphabet will not render the text any more intelligible to the reader ignorant of its language. The disclosure of artifactual intelligibility requires that someone who already possesses the relevant knowledge speak to the student and bring to light the features of the artifactual object that are relevant to her study; the knowledgeable must communicate her 'mind' to the ignorant—or, better, the knowledgeable must reveal the object of study to the ignorant (cf. Sokolowski 2008: 89ff.). As Sokolowski observes, things are presented as articulated in parts and wholes through speech. The intelligibility of a thing, its intrinsic structure and order, is disclosed by the speaker to her audience through the corresponding use of structured language. This, he says, is how children are taught language and thus brought into the domain of rational discourse with others (Sokolowski 2006: 78, 168; 2008: chapter 4). What is true of the intelligibility of the world in general is also true of the intelligibility of artifacts. Only after such an education can the artifact can be

experienced in a qualitatively different manner, its intrinsic intelligibility being perceived more clearly.

Because these conditions define artifactuality as such, they apply equally with respect to the books of the Bible, which are texts, artifacts of a particular sort. It is clear that in the case of the Epistle to the Romans, the reader experiences a genuine encounter with the Apostle Paul (and perhaps also Tertius; Romans 16:22) as the author of this text, as the agent ultimately responsible for the precise intelligible unity of ‘paper and ink’ (cf. 2 John 12) with which the reader is presented, so long as she understands them correctly. Texts mediate encounters in a more direct and profound manner than other types of artifacts precisely because they are typically composed for the purpose of communicating the ideas of their authors to others, to extend the personal presence of the author into places where she is physically absent (Vanhoozer 1998: chapter 5; Sokolowski 2017: 24). Thus, in the case of the Epistle to the Romans, something of the apostle Paul’s vision and concerns regarding the Gospel, Jesus Christ, Jews and Gentiles, faith and works, and the rest are communicated to the reader who understands the text aright. Likewise, his capacity as an author and theologian, as an artificer of a particular sort, is also made clear. Paul can become present in some sense to every reader through the text. But the reader of the Bible as Scripture also encounters another ‘voice’ beyond the ‘voice’ of Paul within the text (cf. Nemes 2017), though the presentation of this voice is much subtler, since it is embodied in the physical unity of the Bible as a volume of distinct texts. Texts are inert, lifeless things, unable to unite themselves; the unity of a volume or a collection of texts must be explained through the activity of rational human agents who compile the texts for certain reasons and publish them as a unity. In the canonical unity of the Bible, then, is embodied the judgment—*not* of Paul or Moses or John, but of the later historical Church, whoever this might be more specifically—that these and only these texts are appropriately designated as ‘Scripture’, as possessing divine inspiration, being drawn from the same divine ‘well’ of knowledge, and that consequently they ought to be interpreted in fundamental harmony with one another [cf. De Lubac 2007: *passim*; Legaspi (2010): 25].

It would be worth considering in further detail what else can be discerned about the authors of the individual texts and the Church as the artificer of the biblical canon. Paul composes his Epistle to the Romans in his capacity as an apostle (Romans 1:1), expecting that the church will accept his teachings in virtue of this apostolic authority. The epistle itself, then, discloses the existence of a particular hierarchical structure within the first generation of Christians: within the greater body of believers, there are some who possess a special authority and charism ‘for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we

all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God' (Ephesians 4:12-13; cf. Acts 2:42). In Husserlian language, the composition and delivery of the Epistle, considered as an event, is a 'moment' of which Paul's apostolic authority is the 'supplement' or foundation (cf. Sokolowski 1974: 9). The condition of the possibility of Paul's particular exercise of his authority is his prior, general possession of this authority. And the argument can be made that this authority corresponds to a real need: precisely because the Church does not yet possess this 'full unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God', there must always exist some persons who retain the authority, presumably under certain objectively specifiable conditions, to make definitive pronouncements regarding matters of dogma and practice; otherwise the faith—in principle at least—would be endlessly subject to revision and reinterpretation with every new generation (Ratzinger 1995: 46, 62-3, 67). This authority is exercised, for instance, by 'the apostles and the elders' at Jerusalem (Acts 15:6ff.), who determine that Gentiles need not be circumcised or keep the mosaic Law, which determination they enforce by sending word to various distant communities of Christians (Acts 16:4-5; cf. Levering 2017: 48-9). (This same authority is also exercised later in the anathemas declared at the Ecumenical Councils.) Thus, within the Epistle to the Romans (as well as in any other biblical text whatsoever), the Church is encountered, but more precisely, those members occupying a particular rank within the hierarchy of the people of God (cf. Levering 2014: 106). The scriptural reader encounters not just anyone, but persons who can speak with the sort of authority encapsulated in St. John's words: 'We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error' (1 John 4:6). This 'we' is perhaps the same 'we' as speaks in the beginning of the epistle (1 John 1:1-4), a member of the college of the apostles and an eyewitness of Christ, who composes the letter out of a concern for deceptive and insubordinate teachers in the community (1 John 2:26; cf. Nemes 2017: 284).

Now, it is evident that the task of the 'equipment of the saints' was not completed within the lifetimes of the apostles; it remains in every subsequent generation of the Church (cf. Levering 2017: 184-5), including that of the contemporary reader. For this reason, it could be proposed that there is always need for some persons to occupy a rank of authority somewhat similar to that of the apostles, capable of making binding pronouncements, whether of a dogmatic or practical nature, for the good of the Church. That is why the apostles took care to appoint (or instruct the appointment of) *episkopoi* who had to be 'apt teachers', who 'hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that [they] may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it' (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9; cf. Nemes

2017: 282). The declaration of the biblical canon, furthermore, is a task which would seem to fall to those on precisely this rung of the ecclesial ladder insofar as Scripture itself is the source of Christian faith and morals, so that the exclusion or inclusion of a text will inevitably affect both dogma and practice. It would be more precise to say, then, that the biblical canon, as an artifact, mediates an encounter with those members of the hierarchy of the Church—whether this is the historical Church or, more proximately, the local congregation in which a believer is raised or included as an adult—who ideally should possess an authority adequate to the nature of their artifact (cf. *Dei Verbum* II. 10; Second Vatican Council 2014: 295).

There is here a further aspect to be noted. To the extent that the composition of a text is an attempt at communication, the author endeavoring to present the world to her audience in a certain light through her written words, it follows that the author simultaneously puts herself forth as the most competent interpreter of what she has written, since they are her own ideas. The Apostle Paul, thus, would be the most authoritative interpreter of his own Epistles, followed by whomever he may have trained and taught as a successor. Something analogous takes place in the declaration of the canon. The judgment about the scriptural status of a particular text—in other words, the assertion of its divine inspiration—presupposes both a grasp of the meaning of the text itself (and thus interpretive competency) and a prior awareness of the content of divine revelation itself. John Meyendorff (1978: 15), for example, highlights the centrality of the criterion of ‘apostolicity’ for the establishment of the canon. If the authorities of the Church are to be capable of judging the apostolicity of a particular text, they must likewise be capable of interpreting it correctly and evaluating it with what they already know to have been apostolic teaching. For this reason, in the physical unity of the biblical volume, the Church in her teaching authorities presents herself to the reader as competent to interpret these texts and to decide between legitimate and illegitimate formulations of divine revelation. In other words, she presents herself as the appropriate and uniquely authorized instructor to provide the prospective Christian with the necessary training for properly understanding the scriptural artifact. Of course, this implies a self-conception of essential identity between the later Church and the earliest generation of Christians. Paul writes as an apostle, as do Peter and John and the rest. The biblical authors take themselves to be writing for the people of God precisely as members of this same people, as belonging to the shared faith of the Church. When the later generation of the Church compiles their writings into a single volume and declares them ‘scripture’, therefore, she also affirms her own fundamental continuity with that aboriginal body of believers. She takes their God to be her own God (cf. Ruth 1:16), their teaching to be her own teaching—but also *vice versa*, her teach-

ing to be theirs. This is what would make her to be a competent interpreter and instructor of all who would become Christians. Sokolowski is right to specify that the later Church ‘presents herself as the collector and transmitter of the written words, not as the author who could rewrite them’ (2017: 25). Subsequent generations of the Church’s teaching authorities are subject to divine revelation received from the apostles, and even the preservation of the apostolic text is a way of maintaining the apostles’ presence with Christians of every generation. But it is worth emphasizing that, among their contemporaries, these teaching authorities would also seem to be consider themselves uniquely empowered to interpret and formulate the apostolic teaching. The apostles provide the ‘seed’ of divine revelation, whereas subsequent generations, through various means, deepen in their understanding of it ‘until we all attain to the unity of faith’ (Ephesians 4:13; *Dei Verbum* II.8; Second Vatican Council 2014: 294).

The argument of this section can therefore be summarized as follows. The Bible, insofar as it is an artifact, mediates an encounter between the reader and the Church, who is its artificer and thus embodied within its pages. This ‘meeting’ takes place as much in the lines of an individual text as the product of a particular author, as also within the physical unity and presentation of the biblical canon within a single volume, which is a physical embodiment of the judgment (of the magisterium?) of the Church that these texts alone are Scripture and ought to be read as such. In the act of declaring the canon, the Church further communicates an implicit self-understanding, a vision of her own authority and interpretive competency, her teaching authorities (the *episkopoi*, whoever these are) implicitly presenting themselves as the most eligible and authoritative candidates for the instruction of those who would engage in scriptural reading through their fundamental continuity with the aboriginal body of believers.

The Reader as Subject

The discussion of the Bible as object focused on the essential artifactuality of the Bible as a textual object and the exigencies which this condition imposes upon it, whereas the goal in this portion of the essay is to elaborate the content of the faith implicit within the act of scriptural reading itself, bringing out some of the theoretical commitments of this act. Reading the Bible as Scripture—as opposed to reading it as the religious-mythological background of Western society, or for the sake of discovering incoherencies and contradictions, or in search of artistic inspiration, or as an object of secular historical investigation—means approaching the text with an *a priori* openness to assent to whatever it may affirm. This is because the notion of divine inspiration is essential to the concept of ‘scripture’ *per se*, as was noted earlier. ‘All Scripture is inspired by God’ (2 Timothy 3:16), by ‘God, who never

lies' (Titus 1:2). The scriptural reader anticipates the revelation of pure truth within its pages, to which a person should always be disposed to assent (Levering 2008: 73). This implies that scriptural reading is an act of faith (cf. De Lubac 2007: 452-3).

Of course, not every faith is adequate to the task. This is because there is an essential difference between Scripture and the biblical text (Nemes 2017: 276-80). Georges Florovsky notes a maxim mentioned by some Fathers: *Scriptura est non in legendo, sed in intelligendo*—Scripture is not in the reading, but in the understanding (Florovsky 1978: 17, 75). A person can spend a lifetime reading and studying the biblical texts, demonstrating an admirable mastery of the texts themselves, even occupying a favorable social-cultural-historical position relative to the original human authors, while remaining fundamentally ignorant of *Scripture*, of the divine message, because she has systematically misunderstood them. This is the accusation Christ brings against the Sadducees and other Jews who did not believe in the Resurrection or in His teaching (Mark 12:24; John 5:45-7). There is also the following problem: because the scriptural reader anticipates that whatever the Bible teaches is true, she may likely interpret the Bible in light of what she already believes and thus takes to be true. In this way, she runs the risk of finding only herself in the text rather than God (cf. Wolterstorff 1995: ch. 13). Thus, a responsible reader of the biblical text should not take her own sense of what the text appears to be saying, however strong it may be, as demonstrating conclusively that she has interpreted it aright. This is clear in light of the anterior inaccessibility of artifacts mentioned earlier: a person must be taught how to approach the artifact in order for its genuine intelligibility to be disclosed, not to mention that her education may have been mistaken, and the same is invariably going to be true in the case of the biblical artifact, as well.

Every person who enjoys interpretive success in her act of reading the Bible as Scripture—in other words, who interprets the biblical words correctly so as genuinely to enter into contact with Scripture—for that very reason and to that extent shares in the mind of the inspired biblical authors and of the Church who established the limits of the canon and preserved it throughout the generations. Now, the earlier discussion about the epistemic inaccessibility of artifacts and the necessity of an initiatory 'catechesis' implies that any such successful reader will inevitably have received such an education *not* primarily from the biblical text itself, but from another person who already believed rightly. And this is indeed the reality, as Dumitru Stăniloae noted:

If you inquire of any believing man the way by which faith came to reside in him, he will respond that it was through the preaching or the life of another, if he received the faith at a later age, or through his parents, if he grew up with it since

childhood. There is no man who won his faith through nature, through the impersonal visible world. In the first place, practically speaking, such a thing is impossible to realize. Any man, before arriving at the power of contemplating nature, lives in direct relation to others who are older, with his parents, with those who raise him. Normally, in any religious society, a man receives the faith in that phase of his life in which the relation between himself and nature has not yet been clarified in his mind (1993: 14; my translation).

Consider also the point made by St. Augustine in the preface to his treatise *On Christian Doctrine* (1995: Preface, 7; cf. Levering 2008: 65) that even the person who boasts of the illumination of the Holy Spirit in her interpretation of Scripture nevertheless was taught how to read by others. But mere reading knowledge is not sufficient for the Bible to become intelligible to just any reader. The Epistle to the Romans remains opaque without familiarity with the meaning of terms like 'Paul', 'Jesus Christ', 'apostle', 'Jew', 'Gentile', 'God', 'Israel', 'faith', 'works', 'law', 'righteousness', and the rest. Indeed, as can be seen through the preponderance of commentaries and interpretive disputes, the Epistle often remains impenetrable even to the person intimately acquainted with all these concepts! Because 'faith comes from what is heard' (Romans 10:17), because the transmission of faith occurs through the mediation of the evangelist, it is evident that every person who reads the Bible with success finds herself at the end of a long chain stretching all the way back to the apostles and, through them, to Jesus Christ, however this mediation may have taken place.

It follows from this that the scriptural reader, whether she realizes it or not, brings her prior faith, received from another, with her to the act of scriptural reading and deepens it in 'dialog' with the text. Her faith does not and cannot originate ultimately in her reading the Bible because elements of it are present before her first approach of the text. Now, a person generally makes use of an artifact in conformity with the training and education she received, so that her training both enables and limits her use of it. The same principle also applies in the case of the Bible as a textual artifact and the 'use' a particular reader makes of it. For example, if she was taught that every passage in the Bible contains a message or truth addressed to her individually, a personalized promise or encouragement from God, then this will inform the way she reads the text. (Similar considerations apply in the case of the person who, when she was evangelized, was told explicitly that Christ was merely a human prophet or that God exists in a body.) Naturally, some passages will not prove easily susceptible to such a highly individualistic and ahistorical reading—e.g., imprecatory psalms, or violent histories, or genealogical records—and so the reader may either avoid them or be frustrated at their presence. Speaking more generally, if a person finds that the education and training she received is insufficient to

make sense of the ‘phenomena’ she encounters in the biblical text, she may appeal to persons she recognizes as capable readers or religious authorities for answers. If she finds these answers problematic or unsatisfactory, she may either come to doubt the scriptural status of the Bible (especially if her difficulties have to do with the truthfulness of the text) or she may come to reject the interpretive tradition she received in favor of another which makes better sense of the text as it appears to her.

It would seem, then, that tradition is unavoidable. The hypothetical dissatisfied reader necessarily received a ‘tradition’ from someone or other, so that ‘The realistic question is not whether we will have a tradition, but which one are we to have’ (White 2017: 35). The preceding discussion about the artifactuality of the text should make clear, however, that the appropriate method for the reader is not simply to find a tradition that can make sense of the textual ‘phenomena’ she discerns in the Bible, since her training and education are partially responsible for these appearances in the first place. The earlier argument showed Scripture to be inseparable from the Church and her Tradition, and this as a result of the artifactuality of the biblical text. Therefore, one could suggest that the reader ought instead to begin outside of herself and her own perceptions, seeking to be taught, for example, by those who claim for themselves apostolic succession and who retain the teachings of the apostles as they were first passed down (cf. Nemes 2017).

But cannot the Church err in her teaching? Has Christian Tradition really retained everything the apostles first passed down in doctrinal and practical purity? The answer to be given to this ecclesiological-theological question separates Protestants from Catholics and Orthodox. In developing one possible response, it would seem worthwhile to bring to light the prior conditions which make possible the existence of the Bible in the first place, since Holy Writ is the ‘common ground’ between these different ecclesial traditions. If the scriptural reader anticipates an encounter with God in the words of the Bible, her faith has to be adequate to its object. The biblical texts could not be ultimately binding and authoritative over her, as she takes them to be when she reads them as Scripture, unless their authors were made capable of producing such an effect through God’s grace, since an effect cannot exceed the capacities of its cause (Feser 2014: 154ff.; cf. Kreeft 2017: chapter 7). In the case of the individual biblical texts, the causality is a collaborative one, God and human author working together to produce an inspired document. But because the authoritative effect had to be reproduced with every passing generation, both in the adequate reproduction of the biblical texts as well as in the elucidation of orthodox Christian dogma and practice through their interpretation, in addition to the establishment of the biblical canon and the resolution of various and signifi-

cant doctrinal disputes and controversies, one might suppose that the gift of grace which enabled this authoritative effect first to be produced would have to be retained by those who succeeded the position of the apostles with every generation. The ecclesial task of the 'equipment of the saints' (cf. Ephesians 4:12) has not yet been completed. The apostles' authority corresponds to a need which never disappears and thus must be inherited by their successors, so that the same authority accorded to the texts as Scripture must be granted, in an appropriately delimited way, to the Church and her Tradition which declared the scriptural canon—itsself a task aimed at 'the equipment of the saints ... until we all attain to the unity of the faith'—and teaches the true faith in order to make the biblical text intelligible. This authority the Church claimed for herself when at the First Nicene Council, for example, she anathematized those who deny the Nicene understanding of the Son in various ways (Bettenson and Maunder 1999: 28). The inseparability of Scripture from Church and Tradition implies that the authority of the one is communicated to the others. Faith in the Church could therefore seem to be implicit in every act of reading the Bible as Scripture, as the analysis has made explicit.

On the other hand, if the Tradition can err, one could argue that it would follow that the biblical canon itself is in principle revisable—a supposition very clearly incompatible with the attitude adopted in reading the Bible as Scripture!—since it is also a product of the Tradition. As suggested earlier, the absence of a magisterium could be thought to threaten to reduce Christian theology to a liberal art, subject as such to the unpredictable, sometimes irreconcilable twists and turns of scholarship, endangering the unity of the Church and evacuating Christianity of any notion of a 'faith that was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3). Legaspi (2010) has documented this transformation as it took place in the European context, and especially relevant is the discussion about Cappel and Miron. Such a rejection of Tradition either anoints the academic quarter (philologists, textual critics, historians, et al.) as a sort of magisterium—but insofar as it studies texts whose canonical status it could not possibly have established, it implicitly depends on the non-academic judgment of the Church's magisterium, which shows that the Tradition has not been entirely bracketed—or else the individual believer is ordained as a quasi-magisterium unto herself. To suppose, on the other hand, that the canon cannot be revised, while (almost) everything else the Tradition has produced can, would seem to constitute a departure from 'the things themselves' into an unverifiable, purely theoretical realm. This option remains a logical possibility, but it is not clearly suggested or required by any of the facts of the dispute, in light of which Scripture would seem to be intimately entangled with both Church and Tradition, and so it has the appearance of motivated reasoning. It may seem

rather strange that a person should be ready to believe that providence can guide the largely mysterious processes of composition, redaction, compilation, etc. which produced the canonical texts, actions which belong to the Church and were undertaken by her in history, while insisting that other public actions of the Church of God, performed on her own authority, are less trustworthy and questionable in principle.

Concluding Remarks on the Controversy about Icons

This final section of the present essay seeks to bring to light the consequences of the preceding analysis for one of the continuing controversies which separates Christians, namely the problem of icons and religious images. The faith implicit in the act of scriptural reading can be further elaborated in a manner that is relevant for this particular issue, as well, so that an analogy between scriptural reading and the cultic use of icons can be drawn. What follows is a defense of their value for the spiritual life.

The reader of the Bible as Scripture, as was noted above, anticipates the encounter of the truth in the words of the biblical text insofar as they are inspired by God. But Christians also engage in scriptural reading for the sake of being sanctified by this experience. The Bible certainly has a certain sanctifying potency, something to which anyone who has made a habit of reading it can attest: it empowers the Christian, bringing her nearer to God, teaching her how to live righteously in the world, enabling her to resist temptations and to live in holiness; it enables ‘beatific hearing’ (Sokolowski 2017: 21). But it is important to recognize the levels of mediation taking place in this sanctifying encounter with God’s Word. The typical scriptural reader in America, for instance, reads the Epistle to the Romans in English, not in its original *koinê* Greek, translated not from the original text but from a scholarly reconstruction thereof, realized according to the training of the relevant body of scholars in keeping with the evidence available to them and considered by them to be salient to their task, and so on. On the subjective ‘pole’ of this act, the reader inevitably approaches the text having been catechized in some way or other by persons near to her, whether they be her parents or religious figures in her community, who themselves occupy a certain place in a long chain of Christian teaching and evangelization going backwards into the past. The scriptural reader has to believe, therefore, that the sanctifying causality of God can traverse this immense ‘distance’, making use of the material world, of secular studies, and of the history of both the human race and the Church in order to produce its proper effect of holiness in her. Put another way, the scriptural reader must believe that the material world possesses the potential to mediate the divine-human dialog (Stăniloae 2010: chapter 1), that the physical-historical sphere and the spir-

itual-divine sphere are not separated by an impossible chasm (Levering 2008).

It is important at this juncture to note the mediatorial role which other humans play in the process of sanctification. Scriptural reading can be a sanctifying experience in two ways, both essentially including the human author. In the first place, the propositional content which is communicated through the text can be sanctifying (cf. Sokolowski 2017: 31-2). For instance, the Epistle to the Romans can sanctify when it affirms that ‘Christ did not please himself’ (Romans 15:3). This very concise summary of the entire story of Christ—His incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection—sanctifies by reminding us of Jesus’ perfect self-gift in love. The reader is moved by the Lord’s infinite love for her, she is moved to shame and repentance over her own selfishness and the manner in which she refuses to make herself available for others who have need of her help, and in this way she is brought closer to God through the reading. The biblical author here functions as the mediator of the sanctifying message, since without his activity the reader would not have access to it. But there is another, more basic way in which scriptural reading can sanctify. John, for example, might impress and sanctify not so much through what he says—‘Do not love the world or the things in the world’ (1 John 2:15)—but through that fact that he says it sincerely and honestly. In this case, it is the presence of the sanctified author emerging from his text that sanctifies, an encounter with a person whose concerns and way of life is so starkly different from that of the reader herself. Just as the proverb says, ‘He who walks with wise men becomes wise’ (Proverbs 13:20), so also the person who keeps the company of saintly persons finds herself similarly affected. In the case of the scriptural reader, it is the ‘extended’ presence of the author through his text which sanctifies. This distinctly personal mode of sanctification is more basic than the former, propositional mode inasmuch as even impressive preaching, if it comes from a recognizably sinful and unregenerate person, cannot sanctify: ‘Like a lame man’s legs, which hang useless, is a proverb in the mouth of fools’ (Proverbs 26:7).

Both modes of sanctification are also present in the case of icons (cf. Giallis 2005: chapter 3). Jean-Luc Marion describes the experience of gazing upon an icon in this way:

our gaze becomes the optical mirror of that at which it looks [viz. the face depicted within the icon] only by finding itself more radically looked at: we become a visible mirror of an invisible gaze that subverts us in the measure of its glory. The invisible summons us, ‘face to face, person to person’ (1 Cor. 13:12), through the painted visibility of its incarnation and the factual visibility of our flesh: no longer the visible idol as the invisible mirror of our gaze, but our face as the visible mirror of the invisible. Thus, as opposed to the idol which delimited the low-

water mark of our aim, the icon displaces the limits of our visibility to the measure of its own—its glory. It transforms us in its glory by allowing this glory to shine on our face as its mirror but a mirror consumed by that very glory, transfigured with invisibility, and, by dint of being saturated beyond itself from that glory, becoming, strictly though imperfectly, the icon of it: visibility of the invisible as such (2012: 22; cf. Manoussakis 2016).

And St. John of Damascus writes the following:

I may not have many books, nor have much time to read, but, strangled with thoughts, as if with thorns, I come into the common surgery of the soul, the church; the luster of the painting draws me to vision and delights my sight like a meadow and imperceptibly introduces my soul to the glory of God. I have seen the perseverance of the martyr, the recompense of the crowns, and as if by fire I am eagerly kindled to zeal, and falling down I venerate God through the martyr and I receive salvation (2003: 46).

The experience of the icon is sanctifying in much the same way as scriptural reading, even though what is encountered is not primarily a text but an image. The Damascene notes that it is both the ‘perseverance of the martyr’, his imposing, sanctifying presence which is brought forth by the image which depicts him in a particular light (cf. Sokolowski 2000: 82), as well as the ‘the recompense of the crowns’, which reminds of the doctrine of the Final Judgment, a propositional mode of sanctification, that brings the theologian to his knees in veneration of God. The icon discloses these realities to its beholder (Giakalis 2005: 37). Marion, on the other hand, notes how the experience of an icon consists more in being gazed at, in being the recipient of the invisible divine gaze through the mediation of the physical image, than in gazing upon the figure depicted within it. The icon makes a person aware of the gaze of God upon her, effecting a reversal of the normal intentionality: ‘In front of the icon, as in front of the face of the Other, I find myself as an object for an Other, I recognize that *I have been seen*’ (Manoussakis 2016: 19). The sanctifying presence of the holy Invisible is mediated through the image, a mediation which is made possible because the Invisible made Himself visible in the Incarnation: Jesus Christ is ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Colossians 1:15), and those who are his friends ‘are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit’ (2 Corinthians 3:18; cf. John of Damascus 2003: 29-31). Icons are spiritually helpful, then, insofar as they can sanctify in the same ways as scriptural reading, even if this sanctification is mediated through images rather than words.

Of course, very many Protestants object that the religious use of images is forbidden in the Bible (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:15-18). In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin calls it a suspicion to believe that any image or visi-

ble representation can bring God near (1845: I, 11, 1). This claim does not seem to consider the possibility of God's having assumed a visible and thus depictable form: as 'the man Christ Jesus' said, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9; cf. 1 Timothy 2:5). Most remain convinced of the illegitimacy of icons unless their creation and veneration can be argued from what is formally present in Scripture. The decision of the Second Council of Nicaea against iconoclasm will not satisfy insofar as such objectors maintain that the Tradition of the Church and councils can err, Scripture remaining the only infallible source of theological knowledge. [By contrast, Giakalis (2005: chapter 2) notes that during the iconoclastic controversy, 'the argument from tradition was for both the iconoclasts and the iconophiles the field on which they clashed most bitterly'.] But it should be obvious, granted the discussion of the earlier two sections of this essay, that the supposition of such a hard distinction between Scripture, Tradition, and Church is artificial and cannot be justified. As an artifact, the Bible is inextricably connected to the community of the people of God who created, preserved and interpreted it, through God's grace, from generation to generation, establishing official teachings regarding dogma and practice by the authority of the bishops as successors to the apostles, in faithfulness to their teachings.

On the other hand, Ambrosios Giakalis notes one of the presuppositions of the iconoclastic movement in the earlier generations of the Church: the notion that 'matter, found in a 'fallen' state and alienated from God, cannot possibly become a means expressive of truth, and especially of saving divine truth' (2005: 65; chapter 4). Sokolowski connects iconoclasm with the denial of the Incarnation (2006: 73). Otherwise phrased, this is a denial that the material world possesses the power to mediate the 'divine-human dialog', that it is 'opaque' and so God cannot be reached through it. The commitment to reading the Bible as Scripture contradicts this principle insofar as human beings—embodied, material, and historical as they are—would have no other access to God than through the material world, unless one is willing countenance a kind of secret, unmediated saving *gnosis*. Even in case of scriptural reading, the Christian is encountering God, if at all, through the mediation of a material object with a particular history, by the help of other humans. Christians of all ecclesial backgrounds seek to encounter God in the Bible, which is a physical object and an artifact, subject as such to the exigencies of artifactual existence, so that such a disparagement of the mediatorial power of the material world would appear to be less than Christian. More than that, this encounter with the divinity in Scripture takes place through an encounter with the Church, who enables the divine encounter in various ways. Searching for God, one finds the Church, so that belief in the one would seem inseparable from belief in the other. This in-

separability is quite evidently important for the controversy about icons, and the facts relevant for the discussion—the inseparability of Scripture, Tradition, and Church; the sanctifying potential of the material world; and the rest—have been brought to light here.

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