

Properties of Sacred Scripture: How God Speaks to Man: Part I

In several bulletin articles we took up various topics and events in Sacred Scripture. To study, to learn, to appropriate what God has revealed, it is helpful to know some principles of Revelation – of how God speaks to man – and in particular Sacred Scripture. It is worthwhile, however, to start by bringing out the importance of knowing these basic and fairly simple properties of Scripture, even if we don't make any kind of in-depth study or reading of Scripture. There are at least two things that make these "principles" important. The first is simply that much more will be gained from reading or listening to Scripture if we know these basic truths. The second reason is more particular to our own times. There are, today, innumerable attacks on the faith and Sacred Scripture. People will trot out the most childish, ridiculous, simple-minded accusations against Scripture and, of course, with a great sanctimonious aura of authority and "cleverness." If you know even just the most basic properties of Scripture, you will not be able to help yourself do anything other than roll your eyes at such childish pranks. A simple example is the 6 days of Creation. This brings out the whole cadre of pseudo-intellectuals, like a bunch of little demon-wannabe's all marching to the master's tune, saying: ah-hah, you see the Bible is wrong, you can't believe the Bible – this didn't happen in 6 days, it took 1000's or millions (or whatever number you want to claim) of years. Anyone with just a basic knowledge about Scripture will shake their head, look at that, and say: you can't possibly be that thick-headed. *But...* if a person does not know these basic "things" about Scripture, these petty attacks can affect them, perhaps even weaken their faith – in fact, such tactics *rely* on people not knowing these basic things. Young people are especially susceptible, in part because when we're young we just don't have the capability yet to discern, but also because young ones today are especially the ones being bombarded with these attacks – internet, social media, news, entertainment, and so on. Adults have to be prepared to, well first of all, to be adults. You have to be prepared, if some young person says something to you about this sort of attack, to say: well come on over here and sit down for a minute, buckaroo, and let's hash a few things out about actual reality – you have to be prepared to tell them the truth (in this case) about Scripture. In doing so, you may even save their eternal life. This is the duty of the adult – to guide the young. It's part of being a mature man or woman. But to do that, we have to first become a student of the master ourselves – in this case, know these basic principles and properties of Scripture. So, attention is now turned to these principles or properties of Sacred Scripture.

Although these are not in any particular order, one of the first we might state is that:

In Scripture, God condescends to man to speak to man in terms that he can understand.

This would include, then, using the common way of saying things or understanding things at the time when the particular book of the bible was written.

As an (important) aside, it's helpful to know, as far as is possible, that these principles come from authoritative sources. This one comes from paragraph 18 of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical on Scripture: *Providentissimus Deus* (the Providence of God). Recall that an encyclical is the second highest level of papal document – which means that it is not just some off-the-cuff remark. And Pope Leo, here, is actually echoing St Thomas Aquinas (note that I have put what the Pope said in my own words but it retains the same meaning; the exact quote from Leo is: "...in the same way the sacred writers-as the Angelic Doctor [Aquinas] also reminds us...put down what God, speaking to men, signified, in the way men could understand and were accustomed to." In this encyclical, Leo (following Tradition) also emphasizes God's condescension to man in revealing Himself, so I've just pulled a couple of things together in stating this principle in this way. Although encyclicals, and most other authoritative sources for that matter, tend to be long and perhaps take some effort to read and digest (it's not like reading the funnies in the paper), if you really want to be a serious student of the Lord, it is helpful to read these authoritative sources yourself. If you don't retain everything or even a lot, reading them gives you a sense of certitude – I come away knowing: this is not from me, this is not my personal preference or bias or opinion, this is God's own teaching, given to us through His Church. I put on the mind of the Church and thus the mind of Christ. It is thus no longer I who speaks but Christ who speaks through me. There have been (as far as I know) two encyclicals on Scripture per se, the first being Pope Leo's. Then on the 50th anniversary of *Providentissimus Deus*, Pope Pius XII wrote one called: *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (roughly – Inspired by the Divine Spirit, or: the Breath of the Divine Spirit). Another authoritative source (and one that is a little shorter

and maybe a little easier to read) is *Dei Verbum* (the Word of God), the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.

This one principle can take us far. Although I didn't really want to use this example from Scripture until the end – because it really illustrates almost *all* of the principles that will be presented – it illustrates this one so well that I will use it here and then come back to it. One of the verses in the Book of Joshua says: “God made the sun stand still.” Ooooh, here come the naysayers – see the bible is wrong! The sun does not rotate, the earth rotates. Silly child, do you not know that in Scripture God condescends to man to speak to man in terms that he can understand? And almost certainly at the time of Joshua the common belief was that the sun rotated around the earth. This is a great passage for illustrating these principles.

This next principle or property that will be presented fits very tightly with the first one. In fact, it might even be considered a subcategory of the previous principle. It is simply this:

Scripture does use some figurative language, and while all Scripture has some literal meaning, the literal meaning of a passage may be the figurative literal.

Although articulated in various ways, this is so commonly understood in Sacred Tradition that it is difficult to cite a single source. Pope St Gregory the Great, for example, speaks of this explicitly as does Aquinas; it's in the Catechism of the Catholic Church as well as *Dei Verbum* – to cite just a few authoritative sources. Any even half-way decent Scripture scholar or other theologian acknowledges this. In fact, it's blatantly obvious; but it does, nonetheless, need to be stated explicitly.

Almost everyone uses some figurative language in everyday life. For example, if someone said: “man, that guy runs like a deer,” you wouldn't think that he gets down on all 4's, puts his fluffy white tail up in the air, etc, and then runs. You would understand that what the person means literally is simply that he runs really fast. If you were out (say) disking really dry ground, you might say: that ground is hard as a rock. If it was really as hard as a rock, you wouldn't be able to disk it all! What you mean, of course, is simply that it's really hard. Figurative language helps us to get our meaning across, in part by giving the other person an image in their mind. If you say: that guy runs fast, well ok, but if you say: he runs like a deer, it makes the point better – you can just see the guy flying along. Scripture, then, also uses some figurative language. Let's take some examples, starting with the passage from Joshua. What is the literal meaning of: God made the sun stand still? It simply means that: it stayed light outside longer than the usual period of time. But suppose that's all this passage said: it stayed light outside longer than usual. Ok, that's nice, yawn, onto the next thing. But when it says: God made the sun stand still, this is shouting at us the great power of God – He can even make the sun stand still – and His willingness to go to any lengths for the sake of those who love Him. This use of figurative language, then, communicates more than just the literal meaning of the passage. Poor foolish child who wishes to use this to condemn Scripture – do you not even know the very basics of human communication, basics that most people learn even as children?

We will have to return to this topic in next week's article.

God bless you,

Fr Kuhn.