

## Understanding Revelation according to a Sacramental Mode<sup>1</sup>

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IT SEEMS FUTILE to seek to formalize, under one integrating concept or another, the way in which divine revelation operates. The biblical testimony of revelation is so diverse and multi-faceted that it would be illusory to define the mode of Revelation by one, univocal, theoretical model. Although revelation does not identify strictly with biblical texts alone, the diversity of literary genres in the Bible shows the schema of the transmission of revelation, as well as the diversity and “thickness” of the literary mediations used by God and the sacred authors.<sup>2</sup> Why should we force the fragmented and colourful variations of the word of God—transmitted by way of myths, narratives, laws and prohibitions, prophetic oracles, chronicles, songs and psalms, tales, proverbs, speeches of wisdom, and so on—into a single mode of operation?

Nonetheless, it seems possible to describe a certain mode *par excellence* of revelation’s operation as found in its Christological fulfillment. This is the perfected mode of revelation, in the expectation of the eschatological revelation. If such a mode exists, it should be characterized as having a high degree of harmony with previous stages of revelation. Identifying such a mode could invite us to link the different genres of revelation together which, in the earlier stages, seemed isolated or estranged from one another. This perfected mode, in light of *Dei Verbum*, appears to be sacramental in nature.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Michael Culhane of “Concevoir la Révélation sous un mode sacramental,” *Science et Esprit*, 68/2–3 (2016) 191–205.

<sup>2</sup> See Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, §§11–12.

We will first define such a mode, and then we will proceed to two relevant New Testament illustrations, one from Mark and one from John, before demonstrating that they allow for bypassing two formal dichotomies taken from theologies of revelation.

Our purpose here is not to work out the genesis of *Dei Verbum* (except perhaps incidentally) by comparing the novelty of its concept of revelation to those which preceded it (notably in the First Vatican Council's constitution *Dei Filius* or in the encyclical *Humani Generis* of Pius XII). This is today largely known and investigated elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Our objective is rather to promote an act of reception and synthesizing in the field of fundamental theology. We are seeking to draw out a concept of revelation as expressed in *Dei Verbum*, in keeping its formulation more explicitly homogenous with the testimonies of literary forms in the Gospels.

### Revelation as Sacramentality: Attempting a Definition

The study of *Dei Verbum* [*DV*] divulges a characteristic feature of revelation that we can call "sacramental structure." In the first instance, such a structure is based on the close interaction between the words and the actions of God in revelation, by analogy with the close connection of the words and the human actions of the sacraments of the Christian faith, such as baptism, the Eucharist, and so on. However, the analogy goes further: in the same way that the sacramental words and signs confer the grace they signify, the revealing words and actions communicate the mystery they designate. It is possible to show this from *Dei Verbum*.

The combination of words with actions, deeds or signs, is found in four meaningful places in *Dei Verbum*. It occurs from the outset as a constant in the economy of revelation (*DV* §2). It then comes back to qualify the fulfillment of revelation by Christ (*DV* §4). The pattern then returns again on two more occasions: first, with respect to God's revelation in the Old Testament (*DV* §14), and second, in Christ's manifestation of the Father and of himself, as demonstrated in the New Testament (*DV* §17). The occurrences of the association between *verba* and *gesta* (plus *opera* and *facta*) are thus distributed in a significant and consistent way, as seen in this table with terms of mediation in italics and terms of referents in bold.

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<sup>3</sup> See Christoph Theobald, "L'Église sous la Parole de Dieu," in *Histoire du concile Vatican II (1959–1965)*, vol. 5, *Concile de transition*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo (Paris: Cerf; Louvain: Peeters, 2005), 337–437.

	Latin	English <sup>4</sup>
DV §2 (Law of ) Economy	Haec Revelationis oeconomia fit <i>gestis verbisque</i> intrinsece inter se connexis, ita ut <i>opera</i> , in historia salutis a Deo patrata, <b>doctrinam et res verbis</b> significatas manifestent ac corroborent, <i>verba autem opera</i> proclament et <b>mysterium</b> in eis contentum elucident.	This economy of Revelation is realized by <i>deeds and words</i> , which are intrinsically bound up with each other. As a result, the <i>works</i> performed by God in the history of salvation show forth and bear out the <b>doctrine and realities</b> signified by the <i>words</i> ; the <i>words</i> , for their part, proclaim the <i>works</i> , and bring to light the <b>mystery</b> they contain.
DV §4 (Revelation Made by Christ)	Quapropter Ipse, quem qui videt, videt et Patrem (cf. Io 14,9), tota <b>Suiip-sius praesentia ac manifestatione, verbis et operibus, signis et miraculis</b> , praesertim autem <i>morte sua et gloriosa ex mortuis resurrectione, misso tandem Spiritu veritatis</i> , Revelationem complendo perficit ac testimonio divino confirmat, <b>Deus nempe nobiscum esse</b> ad nos ex peccati mortisque tenebris liberandos et in aeternam vitam resuscitandos.	As a result, he [Jesus] himself—to see whom is to see the Father (cf. Jn 14:9)—completed and perfected Revelation and confirmed it with divine guarantees. He did this by the total fact of <b>his presence and self-manifestation</b> —by <i>words and works, signs and miracles</i> , but above all by his <i>death and glorious resurrection</i> from the dead, and finally by <i>sending</i> the Spirit of truth. He revealed that <b>God was with us</b> , to deliver us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to eternal life.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations of *Dei Verbum* are drawn from *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello, 1998).

<p><i>DV</i> §14 (OT)</p>	<p>Foedere enim cum Abraham (cf. Gen 15.18) and cum plebs Israel per Moysen (cf. Ex 24.8) inito, populo sibi acquisito console. ita <b>Se</b> tamquam unicum <b>Deum verum et vium</b> <i>verbis ac gestis</i> revelavit, ut Israel, quae divinae essent cum hominibus viae experiretur, easque, ipso Deo per os Prophetarum loquente, penitius et clarius in dies intelligeret atque latius in gentes exhiberet.</p>	<p>By his covenant with Abraham (cf. Gn 15:18) and, through Moses, with the race of Israel (cf. Ex 24:8), he did acquire a people for himself, and to them he revealed <b>himself</b> in <i>words</i> and <i>deeds</i> as <b>the one, true, living God</b>, so that Israel might experience the ways of God with men. Moreover, by listening to the voice of God speaking to them through the prophets, they had daily to understand his ways more fully and more clearly, and make them more widely known among the nations.</p>
<p><i>DV</i> §17 (NT)</p>	<p>Christus Regnum Dei in terris instauravit, <i>factis et verbis</i> <b>Patrem suum</b> ac <b>Seipsum</b> manifestavit, atque <i>morte, resurrectione</i> et gloriosa <i>ascensione missioneque</i> Spiritus Sancti <b>opus suum</b> complevit.</p>	<p>Christ established on earth the kingdom of God, revealed his <b>Father and himself</b> by <i>deeds</i> and <i>words</i>; and by his <i>death, resurrection</i> and glorious <i>ascension, as well by the sending</i> of the Holy Spirit, completed <b>his work</b>.</p>

In each of these paragraphs, it is possible to distinguish between two levels: mediations referents. By “mediation,” I mean that which belongs to the order of the economy and of the manifestation; by “referent,” that to which the economy gives access or that which is made present through manifestation. A snapshot of the interplay between the mediations and their referents is shown in the following table.

	<i>Mediations</i>	<i>Referents</i>
<i>DV</i> §2 (Law of economy)	<b>deeds &amp; words</b> works → words → words → works →	<b>doctrine &amp; realities</b> . . . signified (by the words) <b>mystery</b> . . . contained (in the works)
<i>DV</i> §4 (Revelation made by Christ)	presence & self-manifestation <b>words &amp; works</b> signs & miracles death & resurrection sending of the Holy Spirit	← <b>Jesus Christ</b> himself  → <b>Revelation</b> . . . completed <b>God</b> is with us . . . confirmed
<i>DV</i> §14 (OT)	<b>words &amp; deeds</b> →	[God very loving] the one, true, living, God
<i>DV</i> §17 (NT)	<b>deeds &amp; words</b> → death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Holy Spirit →	the Father and Christ himself  the work [of salvation] of Christ

Let us explain our analysis. The law of economy expressed in *DV* §2 is the most elaborate with respect to the sacramental mode of revelation.<sup>5</sup> We

<sup>5</sup> The sentence starting with *haec revelationis oeconomia* comes in with the second version of the schema of *divina Revelatione* (1964), and remains almost stable, with the exception of the word *res*, which will be changed from the singular (*rem*) to the plural (*res*); see *Acta Synodalia: Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II [AS]*, 3/3:71. For a synopsis of the four stages of the schema, see *Concilii Vaticani II Synopsis: Constitutio Apostolica de dogmatica of Divina Revelatione Dei Verbum*, ed. Francisco G. Hellin (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 18–21. On the reception of *DV* §2, see: Helmut Hoping, “Theologischer Kommentar zur dogmatischen Konstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung *Dei Verbum*,” in *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, ed. Peter Hünermann & Bernd J. Hilberath, vol. 3 (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 696–831; Javier Prades López, “La formula ‘gestis verbisque intrinsece inter se connexis’ y su recepción a los 40 años de *Dei Verbum*,” *Revista Española de Teología* 66, no. 4 (2006): 489–513; Christoph Theobald, *Dans le traces de la constitution Dei Verbum du concile Vatican II: Bible, théologie et pratiques de lecture*, *Cogitatio Fidei*

could have expected a simple qualification for the connection between words and actions: the words deliver the meaning of the actions, and the actions attest to the reliability of the words. In the evocation or the reception of the phrase *gestis verbisque* in *DV* §2, the complementarity between actions and words is often brought up, without highlighting the background: *doctrina, res, mysterium*.<sup>6</sup>

However, the model advanced by *DV* §2 is much richer. Actions and words do not solely form a double interaction. The synergy between actions and words is presented as the double mediation of the economy of revelation, but it is immediately translated in terms of consequences of two intermeshing lines, one which starts with works and the other which starts with words. In summary, let us break down the two proposals of the text:

the *works* . . . show forth and bear out the **doctrines** and **realities** signified by the *words*

the *words* . . . proclaim the *works*, and bring to light the **mystery** they contain

In the first line, the deeds and the words cooperate in the designation of the teaching and the realities. This is the doctrine of salvation and salvific realities. In the second line, the words designate the works (deeds) and, through them, the mystery they contain. In the two sequences, to go back to the initial terminology, actions and words do not simply refer to one another in a simple schema, namely that of manifestation and signification. Rather, actions and words provide access to another level: that of the doctrine of salvation, salvific realities and the mystery.

We can, therefore, move forward in our definition of the sacramental structure of revelation: (1) Words and actions (or deeds, or signs) are paired together and operate in synergy. (2) Words and actions make the mystery

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270 (Paris: Cerf, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> The brief *relatio* connected with §2 in the schema of 1964 was already moving in this direction, without mentioning the depth (*AS*, 3/3:75). The complete *relatio* delivered by Cardinal Florit affixed qualifiers specifically to revelation by works (*opera*) and by words (*verba*); it is *historica* and *sacramentalis* (*AS*, 3/3:134). We propose here a more comprehensive understanding, and not less accurate, of the “sacramental” mode of revelation, meaning not only the interaction of *gesta* and *verba* but also the depth of access to the *mysterium*. The importance of the second plan has been perceived by Henri de Lubac, “Commentaire du préambule et du chapitre I,” in *Vatican II: La révélation divine*, vol. 1, ed. Bernard-D. Dupuy, Unam Sanctam 70a (Paris: Cerf, 1968), 188–93.

accessible and communicate it effectively. (3) The mystery can thus be actually anticipated in the here and now of revelation. The sacramental mode of revelation follows a dynamic contained in three different “moments”: the interaction between words and actions, the depth of the mystery in the background, and its anticipation or its advent.

In terms of the third moment, real anticipation, *DV* §4 is particularly suggestive because the first description of revelation in Christ is composed of his “making himself present and manifesting himself.” As indicated by Henri de Lubac, the Latin terms *presentia* and *manifestatio* contain a hint at the Greek terms *parousia* and *epiphania*.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to Christological revelation, mediations are already full of presence. This confirms that the dynamics of revelation are completed by a making present of the communicated mystery.

Moreover, §4 makes it clear that the Paschal sequence (Passion through resurrection and Pentecost) is the fulfillment of revelation. This entails a fourth feature of the sacramental structure of revelation: (4) The paschal sequence is, *par excellence*, the revelation-communication of the mystery.

Let us take a closer look at the mystery in question. In most of the Western translations found on the official website of the Vatican, the term “mystery” is repeated twice identically in *DV* §2. This is the case in Italian, French, German, and Spanish, but not in English. Rather, the English translation at the Vatican site first employs the term “hidden purpose” and then uses “mystery,” while the translation edited by Austin Flannery (cited note 3 above) repeats “mystery” twice. The Latin text actually uses two different terms: first *sacramentum*, then *mysterium*:

<b>sacramentum / mysterium in <i>DV</i> §2 (ed. Flannery).</b>	
Placuit Deo in sua bonitate et sapientia Seipsum revelare et notum facere <i>sacramentum</i> voluntatis suae (cf. Eph 1,9), quo homines per Christum, Verbum carnem factum, in Spiritu Sancto accessum habent ad Patrem et divinae naturae consortes efficiuntur (cf. Eph 2,18; 2 Petr 1,4). . . .	It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the <i>mystery</i> of his will (cf. Eph. 1:9). His will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature (cf. Eph. 2:18; 2 Pet. 1:4). . . .

<sup>7</sup> See de Lubac, “Commentaire,” 118.

Haec revelationis oeconomia fit gestis verbisque intrinsece inter se connexis, ita ut opera, in historia salutis a Deo patrata, doctrinam et res verbis significatas manifestent ac corroborent, verba autem opera proclamant et *mysterium* in eis contentum elucident.

This economy of Revelation is realized by deeds and words which are intrinsically bound up with each other. As a result, the works performed by God in the history of salvation show forth and bear out the doctrine and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works, and bring to light the *mystery* they contain.

The *sacramentum voluntatis suae* is a literal borrowing of Ephesians 1:9 from the Vulgate translation, whereas *mysterium* occurs without reference to the New Testament. As a consequence of using translations, it is common to equate the *mysterium* involved in *revelationis oeconomia* with the logic of *notum facere sacramentum* of Ephesians 1. That, however, seems to be hastily done and overly simplistic if one takes into account the two successive frames: first the eternal purpose of God, and second, the economy carried out. By being attentive to the economy as it is described in the sentence starting with *haec revelationis oeconomia*, I propose to understand *mysterium* in conjunction with Mark 4:11 when Jesus said to the Twelve who asked him about the parable of the sower: *Vobis datum est nosse mysterium regni Dei* (Vulgate). No scriptural reference is associated with *mysterium* in the text of *DV* §2. Therefore, the approximation with Mark 4:11 remains hypothetical and it must be assessed according to its usefulness.

### First Verification Regarding the Kingdom of God according to Mark

The ministry of Jesus in Galilee is opened by the following proclamation of the Gospel of God: “The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is near: repent, and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:15). The proclamation of the Gospel of God by Jesus is like a prologue which contains the full sketch of his ministry. The good news regarding this announcement deals with a new effectiveness of the sovereignty of God. It is the inauguration of the reign of God in an active sense. The reign in this active sense has priority over the kingdom understood as a space. Such an announcement is accompanied by the call to a full human response. It is a formal notice.

The kingdom of God is in the process of happening. It is coming. Time is fulfilled. What remains suspended or unfulfilled is not on God’s side, as



he is thoroughly acting, but on Israel's side, whose response is still awaited.<sup>8</sup> The advent of the reign is objectively engaged by the action of God through Jesus. In order that the reign extends itself fully to all people, Israel should now convert through a reception of Jesus's ministry.

Even though the subject of the reign is not as dominant in Mark as it is in Matthew, the kingdom is the central reality of the ministry of Jesus's revelation. How is such a revelation actualized? The following pericopes of Mark shed light on the answer to this question.

The proclamation of the reign in Mark 1:14–15 employs a spiral of words and actions which are partly repeated and amplified:

- Jesus calls his first four disciples to follow him (1:16–20)
- Teaching at the synagogue with an unprecedented authority (1:21–22)
- An exorcism where Jesus drives out an unclean spirit (1:23–28)
- The healing of Peter's mother-in-law (1:29–31)
- Many healings or exorcisms collected in a synopsis form (1:32–34)
- Initiation of disciples to the itinerant preaching (1:35–39)
- Teaching and exorcisms performed throughout all of Galilee (1:39)
- The healing of a leper, deemed unclean, by the touch and the words of Jesus (1:40–45)
- The healing of the paralytic, including the revelation of the forgiveness of sins (2:1–12)
- The call of the tax collector, Levi, and the sharing of table with sinners (2:13–17)

The proclamation of the reign unfolds through an "economy" of words and actions by Jesus. The authority of his teaching is confirmed by his healings and exorcisms. The words and gestures express in synergy the advent of the reign of God. The acts of liberation include a teaching, particularly with respect to the leper and the paralytic: the overcoming of impurity and the possibility of the remission of sins. The word of Jesus is not only given in the context of the synagogue; it also reaches to the outside world. The word is not only a teaching; it is also an act of liberation in virtue of the same authority. In short, the interaction of words and deeds is used to the fullest extent in the ministry of Jesus. All this comes as the first attestation of the reign which is in the process of happening. God establishes

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<sup>8</sup> See Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 24–38.

it through the ministry of Jesus and thus puts it within the reach of faith for Israel.

To this first testimony will be soon added a series of parables, first centered on the Word, and then on the reign. Between the parable of the sower and its explanation is the insertion of a brief dialogue between Jesus and those around him:

<sup>10</sup>And when he was alone, those present along with the Twelve questioned him about the parables. <sup>11</sup>He answered them, “The mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables, <sup>12</sup>so that ‘they may look and see but not perceive, and hear and listen but not understand, in order that they may not be converted and be forgiven.’” (Mark 4:10–12; NAB)

The expression “the mystery of the kingdom of God” in the singular is a *hapax legomenon*. It is surprising that “the mystery of the kingdom” is said to “have been given” rather than hidden or revealed. In parallel verses, Matthew and Luke have interpreted this declaration of Jesus through an adjustment, which makes it less disconcerting: “Knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of God has been granted to you” (Matt 13:11; Luke 8:10; NAB). The interpretation of the gift in terms of “knowledge” and the transition to the plural of “mysteries” make the declaration of Jesus less abrupt, while making it more homogeneous in its relative context to the many parables.

According to Mark, the communicated mystery belongs to an accomplished event rather than to objective knowledge. As emphasized by Camille Focant, it is strange that the gift of the mystery applies specifically to those who question Jesus because they do not understand the parables.<sup>9</sup> The listeners who interact in confidence with Jesus, have, however, already received the reality of the reign, since his mystery “has been given” to them, but they do not understand the secret message of the parables. They perceive its attractiveness, since they question Jesus, but they cannot decrypt the parabolic revelation of the mystery. Hence the term-by-term explanation of the parable of the sower, centered on the Word, and then the two comparisons of the wheat grain and mustard seed, expressing the mysterious maturation and growth of the reign, which are presented through the humility of a simple seed (Mark 4:26–32).

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<sup>9</sup> See Camille Focant, *L'évangile selon Marc*, Commentaire biblique: Nouveau Testament 2 (Paris: Cerf, 2004), 162–67.

In Jesus's proclamation of the reign of God, we discover an evangelical dynamic which serves well to ground and illustrate the sacramental structure of revelation, drawn from *Dei Verbum*. The synergistic connection between the actions and words of Jesus have brought the mystery of God's reign very close to the audience. The listeners are moved by the novelty of his words and actions. While remaining close enough to question him about the parables. Revelation as demonstrated here possesses both the properties of dialogue and of gift. The economy of his words and actions open the listeners to Jesus and to the fullest and definitive divine action of all: the perfection of the fulfilled gift of the mystery. The reign of God is not simply proclaimed, attested in words and in deeds, but it is also communicated in its reality. The dimension of anticipation of the reign is shown in the admitted incomprehension of the disciples.

### **The Second Verification Surrounding the Bread of Life according to John**

John 6 offers a beautiful testimony of the sacramental mode of revelation, which is much more elaborated upon than what is found in the Synoptics. John 6 contains two successive actions, a long speech, and then an epilogue in the form of a test: Jesus multiplying the five loaves and the two fishes for the crowd (John 6:1–15), Jesus joining his disciples at night on the sea (John 6:16–21), Jesus teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum (John 6:22–59), and then having a tense dialogue among the disciples, among whom some leave and others believe (John 6:60–71).

Consider here the relationship between the multiplication of the loaves and the discourse on the bread of God. The distribution, the multiplication and the superabundance of the loaves and the fishes all function as a sign (John 6:14). Their goal is not just to satiate the crowd, but to provide something additional. The initial mentioning of Passover functions as a sign beyond solely that of immediate hunger, even though this hunger is not neglected as such. To start with, Jesus's action ends on a *quid pro quo* which confirms a profound misunderstanding.<sup>10</sup> The people recognize Jesus as the long-awaited prophet and they want to immediately appropriate him as a king, a petty king or despot of an uncertain crowd. Once established, the sign is ambiguously received and it is the subject of an immediate hijacking.

The crowd's reunion with Jesus the next day, at Capernaum, begins

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<sup>10</sup> On the inability of the crowd to recognize the miracle as a sign, see Jean Zumstein, *L'évangile selon saint Jean (1–12)*, Commentaire du Nouveau Testament 4/2 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2014), 213–14, 221–23.

with a serious clarification by Jesus. In the multiplication of the loaves, the crowd did not even view the sign as a sign, but had stopped in the mere excitement of being satiated (John 6:26). This is confirmed shortly afterwards by the question posed disconcertingly by the crowd: “So they asked him, ‘What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?’” (John 6:30). The plurality of signs had not been lacking (John 6:26). From Jesus’s perspective, the sign is for faith. In reality, the food multiplied and distributed in abundance the previous evening should be perceived as a sign of another food, one that is still to be desired and to be received, which resides in eternal life (John 6:27).

Jesus’s speech describes a flow of gifts/donations. Exceeding the gift of manna, Jesus refers to himself as the true bread that comes down from heaven, given by the Father. The Father gives true bread, the one who gives life to the world. It is the Johannine logic of the Incarnation for the life of abundance. However, this first double gift continues in another, of which Jesus is the personal subject: “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51c). Now it is a matter of the flesh delivered, in anticipation of the Passover of Jesus. Finally, Jesus shows the requirement to eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to participate in the eternal life that he brings. The meaning of the bread has become very highly concrete. Eat the flesh given up and drink the blood that was shed, it is communion at the Passover of Jesus under a sacramental mode of faith.<sup>11</sup>

The speech thus follows a bird’s-eye perspective describing the Incarnation, the Passover, and the Eucharist. In the eyes of Jesus, all this was already contained in the sign of the bread multiplied and distributed in the superabundance at the coming of Passover. We find here what we have called the sacramental structure of revelation. The actions and the words fall in full synergy. The act is a potential sign. Without faith, the act remains in vain and the sign is quickly diverted. In contrast, illuminated by the words of Jesus, the sign opens access to a reality of salvation yet unexpected: the mystery of the bread of life, described following the logic of the gift for life in abundance. Without the speech, it would be impossible to access the depth of the sign. But the act attests to the vital nature and concreteness of the true bread which it signifies.

Through the interaction between act and speech, it is Jesus himself, the Bread of God, who is within the reach of the faith of his followers. Some

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<sup>11</sup> See Zumstein, *L'évangile selon saint Jean (1–12)*, 232–38, on the enlargement of the initial perspective (of the Incarnation to the Eucharist by the Cross) and the post-Paschal footprint of the appropriation (sacramental and believing) of salvation.

believe, even though they are overwhelmed: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Other refused to believe because they are overwhelmed: "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (John 6:60).

Through the economy of action and speech, the bread of life is not only revealed, but it is also communicated. This is shown by the simple fact that it is believed by some of the disciples. He is already in the process of giving life in abundance, while the greatest gift is being announced and anticipated: the Passover.

The sacramental mode of revelation is particularly well attested in the Gospel of John. This concurs with what Michel Gourgues has highlighted in a detailed manner in the Fourth Gospel: the memory and the depth.<sup>12</sup> On one level, the gospel recounts the words and events in which Jesus was the actor and/or the subject. There are a few points of contact with the Synoptic Gospels. John seems however more accurate from a chronological and geographical perspective. But in John, the way of recounting events gives access to a new depth. In the first twelve chapters, the reference follows the logic of the signs whose ultimate meaning can only be understood by believers. In the story of the Passion, the depth is opened by the logic of fulfillment, stamped by scriptural quotations. Other literary processes also support the passage of the memory to depth: ambiguity, double-meaning, symbolism, commentary, and irony. In his gospel, the evangelist conveys particularly well what we have called the sacramental mode: words and actions provide access to what the mystery really communicates, in anticipation or in its coming.

### Avoiding the Usual Dichotomies

A sacramental conception of revelation allows us to avoid two unfavorable dichotomies in fundamental theology, one in terms of actual mediations of revelation itself, and the other in terms of theorizing the truth of revelation.

First, in terms of the operating mode of revelation, the sacramental

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<sup>12</sup> See Michel Gourgues, *En Esprit et en vérité: Pistes d'exploration de l'évangile de Jean* (Montréal: Médiaspaul, 2002), 11–91. From a theoretical point of view, some people consider that the correlation between the literal meaning and the divine meaning is symbolic. This seems to be quite reductive compared to the variety of methods used by hagiographers to give access to the ultimate meaning. See Reimund Bieringer, "Biblical Revelation and Exegetical Interpretation according to *Dei Verbum* 12," in *Vatican II and Its Legacy*, ed. Mathijs Lamberigt, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 166 (Leuven, BE: Peeters, 2002), 25–58, esp. 33 and 36.

conception of revelation cannot situate revelation in God's words alone and not in his deeds, or vice versa. Revelation operates in an inseparable way in the salvific words and deeds.<sup>13</sup> It is not possible to reduce revelation to a history of salvation where the events would be free of all ambiguities. Moreover, it would be entirely illusory to separate the words and the events within the Biblical testimony of revelation. When God speaks, it is an event, even when, for example, it is done under the garb of ordinary wisdom.<sup>14</sup> When God acts, the words of the prophets or of witnesses are required to qualify and enlighten his action. Words and events are intrinsically linked and function synergistically in revelation.

Then, in terms of the theory of revealed truth, the sacramental understanding of revelation, instead of opposing a propositional theory against a symbolic theory, allows for their integration, not in a higher model, but under a simpler mode pertaining to a lower level, closer in my own view to the "phenomenal" reality of revelation. If we situate the mystery as the ultimate reference to revelation, there are two possible reductions.

For some, following the propositional model, the mystery is demonstrated analogically and objectively by doctrinal statements.<sup>15</sup> The propositions of the faith have a clear and conceptually inexhaustible content. The language of faith remains a human language, which makes reference to everyday understandings. In the first instance, to reach the significance of doctrinal statements would be sufficient with respect to knowledge, so that the subject can adhere to divine revelation by faith. Through and beyond these utterances, it is the reality of salvation that is reached by faith. The symbols and metaphors are useful; they fall within a pedagogical strategy. When employed properly, their content of meaning may be translated in a conceptual and propositional way. Such a conception of the doctrine of the faith prevails quite clearly in the theology and Catholic magisterium of 1850–1950.<sup>16</sup> Today, incidentally, it is found in the writings of analytic

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<sup>13</sup> See de Lubac, "Commentaire," 66–71.

<sup>14</sup> As claimed by Cardinal Florit in the complete relatio of schema *De divina revelatione* of 1964, quoted above (note 5): ". . . per locutionem Dei (quae et ipsa est historicus eventus) [. . . by the Word of God (which is also itself a historical event)]" (*AS*, 3/3:134; translation mine). See also Emmanuel Durand, *Évangile et Providence: Une théologie de l'action de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 2014), 13–89.

<sup>15</sup> For a good description of the propositional model, see Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 36–52.

<sup>16</sup> See: Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Humani Generis* (1950), §12; Josef Ratzinger, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, vol. 3 (New York: Herder, 1968), 196–97.

philosophers who have a vested interest in the status of beliefs/doctrines.<sup>17</sup>

For others, promoting a symbolic model, the mystery is indicated by words and realities, signs and practices, according to a symbolic relationship. The symbol is a sign with a singular power of evocation. The symbol mobilizes experiences, impressions, memories, and affections, which are more or less shared in a certain cultural milieu. It is a sign which is not univocal, but rich and powerful, the scope of which is perceived by attention and resonance, as witnessed in poetry. In the Old and New Testaments, the pattern of the “reign/kingdom of God” is, according to John Meier, an excellent example of a “symbol of high potential.”<sup>18</sup> In comparison with concepts and statements, an expression or symbolic communication bears many more meaning valences, thereby grasping more extensively onto the manifold aspects of reality. Rites, singing, and preaching are the means of transmission where the truth of revelation finds its full symbolic expression. Such a conception of revelation was reasonable to John Henry Newman, without however being fully thought out in a systematic form.<sup>19</sup> In recent years, the symbolic model of revelation has been promoted by Avery Dulles. Ultimately, he considers that the symbols of Christian revelation are the backdrop without which the doctrinal propositions of faith would remain relatively poor in meaning and powerless to describe the mystery.<sup>20</sup>

If we return to the triad of referents that are at the background of

<sup>17</sup> See Roger Pouivet, *Épistémologie des croyances religieuses* (Paris: Cerf, 2013), 95–121. Pouivet unequivocally reduced *Dei Verbum* to a propositional model (p. 95–96) and vigorously supports the latter against a hermeneutic conception of revelation (p. 113–16), gathering support from Anna Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 240–43.

<sup>19</sup> See John Henry Newman, “Milman’s View of Christianity” (1841), in *Essays Critical and Historical*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, 1890), 192. While attaching great importance to the symbolism of revelation, Newman retains a propositional conception of the material object of the faith, as evidenced by *A Grammar of Assent* (London: Longmans, 1898), 98–100, 122–53.

<sup>20</sup> See Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 131–45. In his plea for the symbolic model, Dulles strives to integrate the strengths of the propositional model. When he criticizes the theories of revelation as history (e.g., Oscar Cullmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg), he suggests a rebalancing drawn from *DV* §2, and then mentions a “sacramental structure” of revelation (210–11). Later, after having mentioned Christ as the “first sacrament” (in the line of thought of Karl Barth, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, and Edward Schillebeeckx), Dulles nevertheless considers that “for the communication of Revelation, the term ‘symbol’ should perhaps be better than that of ‘sacrament’ (360).

mediations—*doctrina, res* and *mysterium*—we could say, in broad strokes, the propositional model focuses primarily on the doctrinal translation of revelation, giving access to the mystery, while the symbolic model rather reflects the non-thematic effective salvific reality and mystery. The ideal would be to not disconnect the three referents (*doctrina, res, mysterium*).

It would be tempting to oppose these two models as alternatives, but a sacramental understanding of revelation integrates their respective virtues at a more fundamental level of “description.” The words and actions reveal a close synergy, combining their load of symbolization, effectuation, and communication to make present this mystery.

### **Conclusion: A Mode and Not a Model**

Ultimately, the current models regarding a theology of revelation (propositional, event, symbolic, experiential, etc.) seem largely amiss because of the unfortunate effect of unilateral reduction. It is always possible to carry out a hybridization of models, but is it not better to simply do without them? I do not think that the sacramental understanding of revelation that I have attempted to define, establish, and illustrate should be seen as a model. It is simply a highlighting of some of the salient features of the operating mode of revelation, objectively stemming from Christological revelation.

The difference between a model and a mode could be stated as follows: a model is a form that is extrinsic to the phenomenon being considered, of which the explanatory benefits, however enlightening they may be, are proportionate to the effects of abstraction and reduction. A mode, on the other hand, comes directly from the concrete form of the occurrence of the phenomenon, just as it appears from the phenomenon itself.

The sacramental mode of revelation is situated at a lower level of abstraction than the theoretical models. Decreasing the degrees of abstraction is consistent with the objective of a refocusing on the confession of faith, to be honored below the debates of schools or of the spirit of controversy. In the Second Vatican Council, such a concern was apparent with respect to the rejection of the preparatory schema on the two sources (Scriptures and Tradition) of revelation by a large number of Fathers.<sup>21</sup>

Understanding revelation under a sacramental mode includes a limitation however: the word “sacramental” often remains obscure outside ecclesial theology. The Christian understanding of revelation should be intelligible to those outside of the faith, in dialogue with other schools of thought. However, it is sufficient to explain the three characteristics of

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<sup>21</sup> This is notably told by Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” 159–66.



divine revelation: the synergy between actions and words, the access to the depths of the mystery, and the anticipation of the mystery made present. This can be clarified without resorting to the word “sacramental,” whose use is typically Christian.

In addition, it must never be forgotten that revelation is given not only under the mode of objectivity. Otherwise, the mere presence and manifestation of Christ would lead inevitably to faith. In synergy with the sacramental mode of revelation, the inner inspiration of the act of faith is indispensable for the revealed words and actions to actually reach their goal. As expressed in the Gospel of John: “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30–31). The signs are always waiting for a new and full response of faith. N.V