

# 1.

## REVELATION

John and Martha were practicing Catholics who were looking around for a parish to join. They found a parish nearby to their home, but had yet to meet the pastor who was away. Meanwhile, they found out that their elderly neighbor, Mary, who lived all alone, was a churchgoer. So one day, John and Martha invited Mary over to dinner. As they sat in the living room, in the afterglow of a delicious meal, the couple asked Mary about the pastor at the nearby parish. What kind of man was he? Mary was silent for a long time and then finally said, "You want to know the kind of man your pastor is? It's hard to put into words." She paused and said, "If you don't mind, let me share a story about him and you draw your own conclusions." Martha and John settled in, as Mary went on:

There was a terrible storm that year. I remember it well. For three days a fierce winter storm had traveled 1,500 miles across the North Pacific from Alaska, packing gale force winds and torrential rains. In the Sierra Nevada Mountains to

the east, the snow was piling up. The streets were flooded, and in some parts of town, the power was off where trees had blown down. At our small church, the heavy rain and high winds beat against the windows with a violence that Father O'Malley said he had never before heard. He was in his tiny bedroom writing his Sunday's sermon by candlelight.

Out of the darkness the phone in his office rang, shattering his concentration. He picked up the candle, and with his hand cupped in front of it, ambled down the hall. As he picked up the phone, a voice quickly asked, "Is this Father O'Malley?" "Yes." "I'm calling from the hospital in Auburn," said a concerned female voice. "We have a terminally ill patient who is asking us to get someone to give him his last rites. Can you come quickly?" "I'll try my best to make it," Father O'Malley answered. "But the river is over its banks, and trees are blown down all over town. It's the worst storm I've seen in all the years I've been here. Look for me within two hours."

The trip was only thirty miles, but it would be hard going. The headlights on Father O'Malley's twenty-year-old car barely penetrated the slashing rain, and where the winding road crossed and recrossed the river in a series of small bridges, trees had blown down across the river's banks. But for some reason, there was always just enough room for Father O'Malley to maneuver his way around them. His progress was slow and cautious, but he continued on toward the hospital. Finally, in the near distance, the lights of the small hospital served as a beacon to guide O'Malley for the last 500 yards, and he hoped he had arrived in time. He parked behind the three other cars in the parking lot to avoid as much wind as possible. With his tattered ritual book tucked deep inside his overcoat pocket, O'Malley forced the car door open, stepped out, and then leaned into the wind. Its power almost bowled him over, and he was nearly blown away from the hospital entrance.

Once inside, the wind slammed the hospital door shut

behind him, and as he was shaking the water from his coat, he heard footsteps headed his way. It was the night nurse. "I'm so glad you could get here," she said. "The man I called about is slipping fast, but he is still coherent. He's been an alcoholic for years, and his liver has finally given out. He's been here for a couple of weeks this time and hasn't had one single visitor. He lives up in the woods, and no one around here knows much about him. He always pays his bill with cash and doesn't seem to want to talk much. We've been treating him off and on for the last couple of years, but this time it's as though he's reached some personal decision and has given up the fight." "What's your patient's name?" Father O'Malley asked. "The hospital staff has just been calling him Tom," she replied.

In the soft night-light of the room, Tom's thin sallow countenance looked ghostlike behind a scraggly beard. It was as though he had stepped over the threshold and his life was already gone. "Hello, Tom. I'm Father O'Malley. I was passing by and thought we could talk a bit before you go to sleep for the night." "Don't give me any of that garbage," Tom replied. "You didn't just stop by at 3:30 in the morning. I asked that dumb night nurse to call someone to give me my last rites because I know my deal is done and it's my turn to go. Now get on with it." "Patience," said Father O'Malley, and he began to say the prayers of the last rites. After the "Amen," Tom perked up a bit, and he seemed to want to talk.

"Would you like to make your confession?" O'Malley asked him. "Absolutely not," Tom answered. "But I would like to just talk with you a bit, before I go." And so Tom and Father O'Malley talked about the Korean War, and the ferocity of the winter storm, and the knee-high grass and summer blossoms that would soon follow. Occasionally, during the hour or so before daylight, Father O'Malley would ask Tom again, "Are you sure you don't want to confess anything?" After a couple of hours, and after about the fourth or fifth

time that Father O'Malley asked the same question, Tom replied, "Father, when I was young, I did something that was so bad that I've never told anyone about it. It was so bad that I haven't spent a single day since without thinking about it and reliving the horror." "Don't you think it would be good for you to tell me about it?" O'Malley asked. "Even now, I still can't talk about what I did," Tom said. "Even to you."

But as the first gray light of dawn crept into the room and began to form shadows, Tom sadly said, "Okay. It's too late for anyone to do anything to me now, so I guess I might as well tell you. I worked as a switchman on the railroad all my life, until I retired a few years ago and moved up here to the woods. Thirty-two years, two months, and eleven days ago, I was working in Bakersfield on a night kind of like tonight." Tom's face became intense as the words began to tumble out. "It happened during a bad winter storm with a lot of rain, fifty-mile-an-hour winds and almost no visibility. It was two nights before Christmas and to push away the gloom, the whole yard crew drank all through the swing shift. I was drunker than the rest of them, so I volunteered to go out in the rain and wind and push the switch for the northbound 8:30 freight."

Tom's voice dropped almost to a whisper as he went on. "I guess I was more drunk than I thought I was because I pushed that switch in the wrong direction. At forty-five miles an hour that freight train slammed into a passenger car at the next crossing and killed a young man, his wife, and their two daughters. I have had to live with my being the cause of their deaths every day since then." There was a long moment of silence as Tom's confession of this tragedy hung in the air. After what seemed like an eternity, Father O'Malley gently put his hand on Tom's shoulder and said very quietly, "If I can forgive you, God can forgive you because in that car were my mother, my father and my two older sisters."

—Modified from *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*

John and Mary sat speechless. Finally, John said, "Quite a story. Quite a man. How do you know all this?" Mary smiled and said simply, "I was there. I was the nurse who called him." And John and Mary smiled for they had learned what kind of a man their new pastor was.

### **Dismantling the Story**

Quite a lovely and moving story Mary told. There are a lot of lessons in it. With justification an exegete (one who parses, or takes apart, stories for meaning) could develop several dissertations on courage or forgiveness, virtues that are quite apparent in the story. He or she could even arrive at valuable definitions of these virtues, break them down, and systematize them. Or one could tackle the issue of sin, discussing Tom's sins and putting them into categories of seriousness—are they mortal or venial (does anyone even remember those distinctions anymore)? Our exegete could probably draw numerous conclusions from this story. But, as helpful as that might be, it would miss the point.

The point of the story is this: what kind of man is the pastor? Mary could have replied to John and Martha's inquiry with generalizations—Father O'Malley is dedicated, kind, and forgiving. Instead, Mary choose a time-honored way of replying: she told a story and in the story there was not doctrine or proposition, not creed or code, but revelation, the revelation of a person through storytelling.

The Bible is fundamentally a book of revelation. That's a new concept for many because when the average person thinks of revelation, he or she likely thinks of a tangible proposition handed down from on high, a divine statement of something we never knew before. For most people biblical revelation is like catching the map to Captain Kidd's treasure as it floats down from heaven, or learning the secret revealed to the children at Fatima, or hearing the Wizard proclaim, "I am Oz!" That's revelation! As the average person sees it, eventually over all these the centuries, these divine exposures have been collected into an anthology

called the Bible. In turn, these revelations are parceled out in digestible packages, known as dogmas and doctrines, by those in charge of revealing the revelations—that is, the Church. One “comes to faith” by learning, memorizing, and accepting the doctrines, and by being able to repeat them back.

To put it another way, God spoke to the biblical authors, who in turn wrote down God’s words. The Church, the guardian of those recorded and eventually reinterpreted words, then reset them in neat, classified systematic propositions called doctrines as the fixed, inviolable “deposit of faith” or collection of objective truths. This was revelation and tradition at work under an official Church office whose special responsibility was keeping all the doctrines straight (orthodox). The result of all this was that in time revelation became *information* about God, not an *encounter* with God.

This “propositional” view of revelation held sway for many centuries, but it was always suspect. It made religion a matter of the head, of knowledge, of obedience to the Church and it often led to biblical and ecclesiastical fundamentalism. Then came the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, which turned around this thinking and returned to the sources. Revelation was now deemed to be nothing more or less than what it was always meant to be: God’s own self communication. From day one, as we shall note later, God has been revealed to all of humankind in nature, beauty, and the stirrings of the human heart. Consider the beautiful words of this poem by Charles Mary Plunkett:

I see his blood upon the rose,  
 And in the stars the glory of his eyes,  
 His body gleams amid the eternal snows,  
 His tears fall from the skies.

I see his face in every flower;  
 The thunder and the singing of the birds  
 Are but his voice—and carven by his power  
 Rocks are his written words.

All pathways by his feet are worn,  
 His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,  
 His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn.  
 His cross is every tree.

This may not be great poetry but it brings us much closer to the concept of revelation than do fixed propositions. In ancient times, revelation was understood as a generous exposure of God, a communicating invitation: "Here I am. This is who I am. Look at me. Come to me. Share my love." Revelation, in short, was about a person, not a statement; a lover, not a doctrine; a Father O'Malley (to return to our story above), not a treatise. It was not a transmission but an offer; not a proposition but a valentine. And, I repeat, revelation is, was, and always will be open to all.

### **Favorite Child**

Just as a parent loves all her children, but sometimes has a special child with whom she especially resonates, so, too, God was revealed in a unique way to God's own special child, Israel (Ogden's Nash's verse "How odd/ of God/to choose/ the Jews" comes to mind here) without ceasing to love and call all other people. That self-exposure to Israel and its response, which ranged from joyous acceptance to wanton indifference, was orally passed on from generation to generation, then finally written down in what came to be known as the Bible. But even that was not enough for, "in the fullness of time," God was revealed once more in the person of Jesus. This was a definitive invitation, so much so that Jesus was called the "Word of God," and "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14).

Remember that both in Israel and in Jesus, God's revelation was not a set of teachings or doctrines; it was always "'Here I am. This is who I am. Look at me. Come to me. Share my love.'" In Jesus's death, revelation says, "Look, this is how far my love will go." And so in time the record of Israel, this "favorite child," became a priv-

ileged witness to God's love, and the definitive Jesus became the italicized word of all those recorded words God has been speaking to all people since time began: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" (Mt 23:37). Here once more was revelation, not as dogma but as person; not as information but as sharing.

At the risk of offending the reader, I have to say that that is what is wrong with the Christmas *crèche*, that sweet, adorable, and sentimental tableau of Jesus' birth. It deflects our attention away from the act of Incarnation, and focuses our imaginations on flourishes such as animals and angels, magi and shepherds, and a cooing, passive infant. To that extent the *crèche* is misleading. A homily I gave one Christmas tells you why:

A husband and wife, in their late eighties, both were becoming extremely forgetful. He would forget where he put his eyeglasses. Then as he went from room to room searching for them, he would forget what he was looking for. She would announce that she was going to the store for butter, but when she got there she would forget what she was shopping for. One evening, as they watched TV, the husband stood up. She says: where are you going? He says: To get snacks, it's my turn. She says: I want a hot fudge sundae. Write it down! He says: I don't have to write it down. She: And put nuts on it. Write it down! He: I don't have to write it down! She: And whipped cream on top. Write it down! He: I don't have to write it down.

The husband then left to get the snacks. When he returned, he presented his wife with a plate of bacon and eggs. She says: where's the toast?

People are forgetful. They even forget what this feast, Christmas, is about. Even good Christians forget. A recent poll conducted by the Lutherans, for example, found that the largest percentage of Christians interviewed said that Christmas was all about families getting together. Well, that's nice, but what about Christmas being about Jesus?

Even those who did mention Christmas as the birth of Christ, the founder of Christianity, tended to focus on the sentimentality of it all: the appealing baby in the manger, the adoring parents, the animals, shepherds, the choir of angels—the tableau of soft sweetness. Not one in a million, not even, I suspect, most of us here, would zone in on the one word—a rather shocking word—that the Bible, the Church, and tradition tell us is at the heart of Christmas.

That word is not sweetness, softness, gentleness. No, the word is *passion*! Does that surprise you? Yet it's written all over the Christmas scene. The truth of the matter is that we don't have in Christmas sweetness, softness, and gentleness. What we have here on this Christmas night is plain, unadulterated, hard, raw passion. What I'm challenging you to recall is that, yes, we have a cuddly baby, but behind that facade, behind that tenderness, is a fierce and a passionate God; that fact doesn't always come across in the sentimental pageantry of the manger.

Take a second look. The Christmas message and the Christmas celebration center around God's great love for us, the commitment not to leave us abandoned, not to leave us in the darkness of political, social, or personal tyrannies. The message of Christmas is summed up in the words the angel spoke to Mary at the annunciation: "You will name him Jesus," and he shall be known as Emmanuel, which translates "God with us." Yes, "God with us," or, in the reverential phrase of John's gospel, "*Et verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis*"—"And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

Why? Why? Why does God want to dwell among us? Because God wants to. Because, simply put, the object of all love is union: to be with the beloved. So, whatever it is, God has a thing for us—a passion. The real Christmas memory, then, is not that of a passive, seductive baby Jesus but rather of an active, desiring God. Christmas is about a driving

desire on God's part to dwell among us, to be a part of the human condition. God loves us that much. God yearns for us that much. And that's passion. Maybe I can get my point across through a story, a story that mentions a baby. It's told by a woman, the baby's mother. Listen.

It was Sunday, Christmas. Our family had spent a holiday in San Francisco with my husband's parents, but in order for us to be back at work on Monday, we found ourselves driving the 400 miles back home to Los Angeles on Christmas Day. We stopped for lunch in King City. The restaurant was nearly empty. We were the only family and ours were the only children. I heard Erik, my one-year-old, squeal with glee. "Hithere," the two words he always thought were one. "Hithere," and he pounded his fat baby hands whack, whack, whack on the metal high chair. His face was alive with excitement, his eyes were wide, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled and then I saw the source of his merriment. A tattered rag of a coat, obviously bought by someone else eons ago, dirty, greasy, and worn; baggy pants; spindly body; toes that poked out of would-be shoes; a shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over; and a face like none other gums as bare as Erik's. "Hi there, baby. Hi there, big boy, I see ya, Buster." My husband and I exchanged a look that was a cross between "What do we do?" and "Poor devil."

Our meal came and the banging and the noise continued. Now the old bum was shouting across the room, "Do you know patty cake? Atta boy. Do you know peek-a-boo? Hey, look! He knows peek-a-boo!" Erik continued to laugh and answer, "Hithere." Every call was echoed. Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was a drunk and a disturbance. I was embarrassed. My husband, Dennis, was humiliated. Even our six-year-old said, "Why is that old man talking so loud?"

Dennis went to pay the check, imploring me to get Erik and meet him in the parking lot. "Lord, just let me get out of here before he speaks to me or Erik," and I bolted for the

door. It soon was obvious that both the Lord and Erik had other plans. As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back, walking to side-step him and any air that he might be breathing. As I did so, Erik, all the while with his eyes riveted to his best friend, leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms to a baby's pick-me-up position. In a split second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight, I came eye-to-eye with the old man.

Erik was lunging for him, arms spread wide. The bum's eyes both asked and implored, "Would you let me hold your baby?" There was no need for me to answer since Erik propelled himself from my arms to the man. Suddenly a very old man and a very young baby consummated their love relationship. Erik laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed and I saw tears hover beneath the lashes. His aged hands, full of grime and pain and hard labor, gently, so gently, cradled my baby's bottom and stroked his back. I stood awestruck.

The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm, commanding voice, "You take care of this baby." And somehow I managed "I will" from a throat that contained a stone. He pried Erik from his chest, unwillingly, longingly, as though he was in pain. I held my arms open to receive my baby, and again the gentleman addressed me: "God bless you, Ma'am. You've given me my Christmas gift." I said nothing more than a muttered "thanks." With Erik in my arms, I ran for the car. Dennis wondered why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly. And why I was saying, "My God, forgive me. Forgive me."

I would like to suggest that the real meaning of Christmas is in this story. Simply put, Erik is God. Simply put, the bum is us. Erik is God's yearning and passion for us tattered bums with our tattered lives, our tattered hurts, our tattered relationships, and our tattered sins. Erik is two arms determined

to hug us. Erik is a fierce little baby who makes no distinctions but would embrace the least likely—you and me.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14).

That’s what Christmas is about. It’s an enormously unrelenting kind of a feast. It is not sentimentality. It is not soft. It is not sweet baby Jesus. Christmas is volatile Erik. When you look at the manger, there is no cooing baby here: only love satisfied. This is why, when you come right down to it, we celebrate Christmas. If God is not with us and if God has not embraced our tattered lives, woe is us. There is no hope. And there is no light, only darkness and despair.

Most likely, we are here today because of our fruitless socializing, our pressured routine, or our empty sentimentality. But if we are here because of love and we are here like the rag tag shepherds that we are, to kneel and rejoice at the birth of Jesus, then we have caught the meaning of Christmas: Emmanuel, the passionate God, has had his way and has hugged us fiercely.

### **God’s Outreach**

So revelation is Erik. Revelation is God’s outreach. It deals with a (passionate) Person, not a proposition, and—this is important—such revelation came to us first by way of story, a told story, an oral story. Story is the first revelation, and the oral stories have been around for a long, long time. As we shall see, in accord with human nature, the stories were expanded, embellished, and recast through time, space, and various cultures. It couldn’t be otherwise if they were to stay alive.

But by and by, people began to write down these stories in order that they might not be lost. And, of course, the same human tendency developed: the written stories themselves were reworked so that people of different times and places could benefit from them. After all, you couldn’t tell a story about a clever polar bear to people in South Africa who had never seen one or

heard of one, and so you might have to change the polar bear to a fox or a lion in order to preserve your point.

But then something happened to all this oral stories that had been retold and recast in writing. Sooner or later, someone decided that certain stories that had been written down should become definitive and official and that no other versions would be tolerated. Or if certain other versions of the stories were tolerated because they had valuable insights, they would still be subservient to the official writings. In one way, this was necessary so that the stories wouldn't become distorted, especially by people who had axes to grind, and wouldn't lead people astray.

And so it was. A canon was formed, a norm: these and these books alone are declared official, the standard by which all other teachings and stories and books were to be measured. This process was indeed helpful; but it had some unfortunate, unforeseen side effects. For one thing, the written text, unlike the volatile story, became frozen. And so we need interpreters to clear up the polar bear/fox sort of thing.

Secondly, the official interpreters, now people of standing (the scribes and the Pharisees or the theologians and bishops), tended to over-protect the written text. These guardians became somewhat absolute in their stance and people had to conform to their inscribed pronouncements. Insights from cultural and tradition as well as religious folklore were barely tolerated. The interpreters set lots of rules for understanding and believing (faith), and derivative rules for acting (morals). Sometimes these rules also became so frozen and rigid that God's freely given Self-disclosure was clouded over because there were so many hoops to jump through in order to get to it. That must have made God frustrated many times. The following story tells us what sometimes happened.

One evening a workman was wearily plodding home when he stopped to rest by the side of the road. A woman came by hauling a cart full of flowers. The smell of her blossoms so perfumed the air with sweetness that it seemed to take away the weariness in his bones and to lighten his spirits. He had

never experienced such wonder from the many blooms of his own garden.

"How much must I pay, or what must I do, to have some of your wonderful flowers?" he asked the woman. "Oh, good sir," she said, "take what you wish." "What return must I make for them?" he questioned again. "Your gratitude is enough," she said. So the man filled his arms with blossoms and hastened joyfully home. And his wife and his children rejoiced with him over the remarkable flowers, for they, too, discovered that the sight of the was a delight and the smell of them refreshed the soul.

So as not to lose his treasure, the man planted the blossoms in a small plot of land behind his house. Sunlight and water kept them amazingly beautiful, still performing their marvelous magic. When children came to play in the yard, the man cautioned them against carelessness and wild play lest they trample the flowers and damage them. But the flowers remained hardy and strong so long as there was enough sun and moisture to nourish them.

Nowhere else could the man or his wife or children find such remarkable solace from weariness, such comfort in sadness, such spiritual nourishment as those remarkable flowers provided. Here was a treasure beyond value.

And as the family grew and more children came to play in the garden, the man became even more concerned over his remarkable flowers. He was determined to protect them, and so he built a high wall around them. In time, because of his numerous children, he would allow them entrance to the small sanctuary only sparingly and with the utmost care. Unfortunately, this began to cause consternation among the family members. If the children caused their father stress or anguish, he would refuse them access to the flowers. Eventually he set up rules as to who might enter the sanctuary, how they must enter, and what they must do while they were in there. For his part he continued to see that his treas-

ure received enough sunlight and water so that the flowers continued to perform their wondrous magic

As grandchildren began to appear, the man felt even greater need to safeguard his treasure. Access to the flowers was open to all members of his family, but not without certain precautions. Requirements were to be met and standards upheld. Offices were established to judge worthiness and to determine accessibility. It became necessary to have lawyers to defend and judges to weigh and guards to stand guard and caretakers to upkeep, and on and on and on. The man's family, however, saw less and less of the flowers and experienced less and less of their magical powers.

In the meantime, many of them went out in search of the flower lady. Well, she was still out there, still giving away her amazing flowers. (John Aurelio, *Colors!*).

I think we can all resonate with this story. The freely given gifts of the old lady (God) sometimes became constricted with rigid rules made by well-meaning caretakers. Too often, the official interpretation became more important than the text, and the text became more important than the One behind it.