

Public revelation is binding on all Christians, but private revelation is binding only on those who receive it. The Catholic Church teaches that public revelation was completed, and therefore was concluded, with the death of the last apostle (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 4), but private revelation has continued.

“Throughout the ages, there have been so-called ‘private’ revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ’s definitive revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the magisterium of the Church, the *sensus fidelium* [collective sense of the faithful] knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church. Christian faith cannot accept ‘revelations’ that claim to surpass or correct the revelation of which Christ is the fulfillment, as is the case in certain non-Christian religions and also in certain recent sects which base themselves on such ‘revelations’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 67).

Some people tend to go to one extreme or the other on private revelation; they either completely reject the concept or they consider private revelation their chief rule of faith. The original sixteenth century Protestant Reformers denied all private revelation—they had to, for all the miracles that had occurred and all the private revelations that had been received over the previous fifteen hundred years had confirmed rather than attacked the Catholic faith. The original Reformers’ actions were in direct disobedience to the binding command of the New Testament: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good” (1 Thess. 5:19–21).

After the Reformers’ eradication of all new revelation, and thus the distinction between public and private revelation, Protestants were left vulnerable to thinking *any* new revelations would be binding on all Christians. Thus, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, religious organizations which claim such

new revelations have evolved in Protestant circles; for example, the Irvingites, the Mormons, the Seventh-Day Adventists, and the current “Word Faith” or “Prosperity Gospel” movement.

When the Pentecostal movement started in 1900, it faced the problem of explaining why private revelations had ceased for so many centuries, as the original Protestant Reformers claimed, only to begin again during this century. The correct answer, as the following passages from the early Church Fathers show, is that private revelation never did stop.

HERMAS

“The vision which I saw, my brethren, was of the following nature . . . [An] old woman approached, accompanied by six young men . . . [And] she said to me . . . ‘Lo! do you not see opposite to you a great tower, built upon the waters, of splendid square stones?’ For the tower was built square by the six young men who had come with her. But myriads of men were carrying stones to it, some dragging them from the depths, others removing them from the land, and they handed them to these six young men. . . . [And the woman said:] ‘The tower which you see building is myself, the Church . . . the tower is built upon the waters . . . because your life has been and will be “saved through water” [1 Pet. 3:20–21] . . . the six young men . . . are the holy angels of God . . . the other persons who are engaged in carrying the stones . . . also are holy angels of the Lord . . . [And] when the tower is finished and built, then comes the end’” (*The Shepherd* 1:3:1–8 [A.D. 80]).

THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP

“While he [Polycarp] was thus at his prayers, three days before his arrest, he had a vision in which he saw flames reducing his pillow to ashes; whereupon he turned to his companions and said, ‘I must be going to be burnt alive.’ . . . [After his arrest, the crowd called] loud demands for the Asiarch Philip to let loose a lion at Polycarp. However, he told them

that the rules would not allow him to do so, since he had already declared the beast-fighting closed; whereupon they decided to set up a unanimous outcry that he should have Polycarp burnt alive” (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5, 12 [A.D. 155]).

“Polycarp was . . . bishop of the Catholic Church at Smyrna, and a teacher in our own day who combined both apostle and prophet in his own person. For indeed, every word that ever fell from his lips either has had or will have its fulfillment” (ibid., 16).

JUSTIN MARTYR

“For the prophetic gifts remain with us [Christians], even to the present time. And hence you [Jews] ought to understand that [the gifts] formerly among your nation have been transferred to us” (*Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 82 [A.D. 155]).

IRENÆUS

“In like manner we do also hear many brethren in the Church who possess prophetic gifts and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages and who bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men, and declare the mysteries of God” (*Against Heresies* 5:6:1 [A.D. 189]).

PIONIUS

“I, Pionius, have made a fresh transcript of [*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*]. I found them after Polycarp the Blessed had revealed their whereabouts in a vision, as I will explain hereafter. Time had reduced them almost to tatters, but I gathered them carefully together in the hope that the Lord Jesus may likewise gather myself amongst his elect into his heavenly kingdom. To him, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory forever and ever. Amen” (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*, copyist note 2 [A.D. 250]).

CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

“And while he [the Emperor Constantine] was praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven, the account of which it might have been hard to believe had it been related by any other person. But since the victorious emperor himself long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history [Eusebius], when he was honored with his acquaintance and society, and confirmed his statement by an oath, who could hesitate to accredit the relation, especially since the testimony of after-time has established its truth? He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes a trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, ‘Conquer By This.’ At this sight he was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle. He said [to me], moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this apparition could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies. . . . [B]eing struck with amazement at the extraordinary vision, and resolving to worship no other God save him who had appeared to him, he sent for those who were acquainted with the mysteries of [God’s] doctrines and inquired who that God was and what was intended by the sign of the vision he had seen” (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1:28–32 [A.D. 337]).

ANTHONY OF EGYPT

“[Anthony told his monks:] When, therefore, they [demons] come by night to you and wish to tell the future, or say ‘We are the angels,’ give no heed, for they lie. . . . But if they shamelessly stand their ground, capering, and change their forms of appear-

ance, fear them not, nor shrink, nor heed them as though they were good spirits. For the presence either of the good or evil by the help of God can easily be distinguished. The vision of the holy ones is not fraught with distraction: 'For they will not strive, nor cry, nor shall anyone hear their voice' [Matt 12:19; cf. Is. 42:2]. But it comes quietly and gently that an immediate joy, gladness, and courage arise in the soul. For the Lord who is our joy is with them, and the power of God the Father" (Ambrose, *Life of St. Anthony* 35 [A.D. 359]).

AUGUSTINE

"For even now miracles are wrought in the name of Christ, whether by his sacraments or by the prayers or relics of his saints . . . The miracle which was wrought at Milan when I was there . . . [and when people] had gathered to the bodies of the martyrs Protasius and Gervasius, which had long lain concealed and unknown but were now made known to the bishop Ambrose in a dream and discovered by him" (*City of God* 22:8 [A.D. 419]).

"[T]he martyrs, by the very benefits which are given to them that pray, indicate that they take an interest in the affairs of men . . . For not only by effects of benefits, but in the very beholding of men, it is certain that the confessor Felix . . . appeared when the barbarians were attacking Nola, as we have heard not by uncertain rumors but by sure witness" (ibid., 19).

"A certain man by [the] name Curma [was in a coma] . . . Yet he was seeing many things as in a dream; when at last after a great many days he woke up, he told that he had seen. . . . [He also saw] Hippo, where he was seemingly baptized by me . . . After much that he saw, he narrated how he had, moreover, been led into paradise and how it was there said to him, when he was dismissed to return to his own family, 'Go, be baptized if you want to be in this place of the blessed.' Thereupon being admonished to be baptized by me, he said it was done already. He who was talking with him replied, 'Go, be truly baptized, for

you only saw that in a vision.' After this he recovered, went his way to Hippo. . . . He was baptized [and] at the close of the holy days [of Easter] returned to his own place . . . Why should we not believe these to be angelic operations through the dispensation of the providence of God?" (*The Care to be Had for the Dead* 15 [A.D. 421]).

SOZOMEN

"Gregory of Nazianz presided over those who maintain the consubstantiality of the Holy Trinity, and assembled them together in a little dwelling, which had been altered into the form of a house of prayer, by those who held the same opinions and had a like form of worship. It subsequently became one of the most conspicuous in the city, and is so now, not only for the beauty and number of its structures, but also for the advantages accruing to it from the visible manifestations of God. For the power of God was there manifested, and was helpful both in waking visions and in dreams, often for the relief of many diseases and for those afflicted by some sudden transmutation in their affairs. The power was accredited to Mary, the Mother of God, the holy Virgin, for she does manifest herself in this way" (*Church History* 7:5 [A.D. 444]).

PATRICK OF IRELAND

"And there truly [in Ireland] one night I heard in my sleep a voice saying to me, 'You fast well; soon you will go to your fatherland.' And again, after I very short time, I heard the heavenly voice saying to me, 'Lo, your ship is ready.' And it was not near at hand, but was distant, perhaps two hundred miles. And I had never been there, nor did I know any person living there. And thereupon I shortly took flight and left the man with whom I had been for six years. And I came in the strength of God, who prospered my way for good; and I met with nothing to alarm me until I reached that ship" (*Confession of St. Patrick* 17 [A.D. 452]).

"And once more, after a few years, I was in Britain with my family. . . . And there indeed I saw in a vision of the night a man whose name was Victoricus coming as it were from Ireland with countless letters. He gave me one of them, and I read the beginning of the letter, which was entitled 'The Voice of the Irish.' And while I was reading aloud the beginning of the letter, I thought that at that very moment I heard the voices of those who dwelt beside the Wood of Foclut [in Ireland], which is nigh unto the Western Sea. And thus they cried, as with one mouth, 'We beseech you, holy youth, to come and walk once more among us!'" (ibid., 23).

"Let those who will, laugh and mock. I shall not be silent nor conceal the signs and wonders which were shown to me by the Lord many years before they came to pass, since he knows all things even before the world's beginnings" (ibid., 45).

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