

THE INSPIRATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

A simple and satisfactory explanation of the inspiration of Sacred Scripture is given by the Church when she teaches the faithful that God uses the sacred author as His instrument. This has been the central theme of those whose duty it was to speak of "the inspired word of God", from the earliest Fathers to the present supreme Pontiff. The author of the *Cohortatio ad Graecos*, of the time of St Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 150) used a comparison which in one form or another was to become a commonplace: The sacred authors "had no need of literary artifice, they had not to engage in controversy or polemic [with each other]; they had only to lend themselves completely to the operation of the Holy Spirit, so that that divine quill, coming down from heaven, might use just men like a sort of musical instrument, lyre or zither, and so open to us the knowledge of divine and heavenly things". Soon after, Athenagoras speaks of the Spirit "using" the sacred writers, "as if a flute-player were blowing on his flute". At times authors like St Augustine, speaking of these "letters sent us from our heavenly fatherland", point more specifically to the activity of the human instrument when they say that God "dictated": "When they [the sacred authors] wrote what God showed and said, no-one may deny that He Himself wrote, since His members worked out what they had learned as their Head dictated". St Thomas is precise and clear: "The Holy Ghost is the author, the man is the instrument" (*Quodlibetum* vii.xvi); "Our faith lays it down that Sacred Scripture was given to the world by the Holy Spirit who dictated it (*Spiritu Sancto dictante*)". Following the same line of thought, and giving it his sanction, the present Pope stated in the Encyclical *Divino afflante* that the basis and norm of theologians' discussions has been the truth that "the hagiographer when writing his sacred book is the organon or instrument of the Holy Spirit". Clearly, both in the patristic *kerygma* and the theological studium the notion of instrument has been central. It appears as the universally accessible notion from which one may proceed to illustrate the less apparent. Everyone knows what an instrument is and from this all can learn what inspiration is.

One is therefore astonished to find "instrumentality" treated in the works of recent writers on inspiration not as the key to a puzzle, but as a puzzle to which a key must be sought. The article "Inspiration" in the Supplement to the *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, which has been generally and rightly greeted as a good exposition of the

present-day thought of many Catholic theologians on the subject, is particularly fitted to exemplify an approach which many must find somewhat disconcerting. The author, R. P. Courtade, having excluded the "natural concursus" by which God imparts motion to secondary causes acting in their own sphere, approaches inspiration by discussing God's use of certain material agents to produce results beyond their natural power. God, he says, determines to use creatures, in certain circumstances, to accomplish works which surpass their power. In such cases He is not content with according them that general motion (*concoirs général*) which all secondary causes stand in need of. By means of a special movement, at the moment that He makes them act, He *elevates* their action to a preternatural or supernatural order. The role they then play is exclusively instrumental. By means of water, God healed Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy long ago. By means of water, He cleansed us from original sin. In these cases, the water was in no wise the principal cause of the effect produced. We are already within the "domain of mystery"—because the motion imparted by the divine artisan is not mechanical or local but something that penetrates the instruments "*jusqu'au plus intime*".¹

We need not yet ask is the comparison of inspiration with the working of miracles or the production of sanctifying grace legitimate. The author does not insist on it; he uses it merely to build up the proper atmosphere of awe in which the analysis of instrumental causality in inspiration is to be approached. "We come now to the sacred writers. Here the instrument which God uses is no longer a thing, it is a person. And it is as a person that God uses him, in virtue of his intelligence and his free will. The mystery thickens before our eyes". The reason indicated for this double inspissation is that we know what it is for one man to make use of another as his minister, his spokesman, his servant. "But to take a man as an instrument in the strict sense of the word—this power belongs to God, and to Him alone". There is excuse here for returning to a problem still open to discussion if the best that can be said of it so far is that we are in the domain of mystery, a mystery which gets darker the deeper we go in. Must we remain in this philosophical gloom, or may cheerfulness break in?

The question may be restated in traditional terms. What is the peculiar nature of the action of God on the sacred writer which reduces him, so to speak, to an instrument? It is not the natural concurrence of God with his faculties, for otherwise God would be author of all books. It is not the supernatural concurrence of actual grace, for otherwise God would be the author of all books so written :

¹ *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, Supplement, VOL. IV, col. 512.

and we may assume that many pious books for which the saints begged the light of grace have in fact been written under the constant influence of efficacious graces. It would be hard to think, for instance, that the Supreme Pontiffs, when defining a dogma, did not write under the impulse of efficacious grace, which determined them freely and infallibly to fix in their minds what God wanted. And we know that God's assistance was there to ensure that it was aptly expressed. The conclusion suggests itself that there must be a *third* kind of divine concurrence, neither natural nor supernatural in the ordinarily known sense, to make the subject God's instrument. P. Courtade looks for it in the region of the mysterious : something on the lines of the action of God on the waters of baptism. One disadvantage would be that such an explanation would be *obscurum per obscurius* ; another, and more telling, that it does not seem to be in keeping with the ancient patristic and ecclesiastical tradition, which looked to the notion "instrument" for light, not darkness.

An easy way out would be to appeal to everyday life, in some such way as this. Everyone would call a man the instrument of an author, if the man wrote what the author determined, under the compulsion, the control, the assistance and inspection of the author, and if the author signed his name to the joint production. Now it can be said that God determines what the sacred writer sets down when He directs his attention infallibly to the ideas He wishes. He impels the sacred writer's will, as efficaciously—to say the least—as any command can move an inferior. He watches over the execution, to ensure that it aptly expresses what He wants. And finally, by handing over the books to the Church as inspired, He seals them with His name and proclaims them as His word. This is, element by element, the description of inspiration in the Vatican Council and the great biblical encyclicals, and is too well known to need exposition here : except that the presentation of the books to the Church, with the revelation of their being inspired, must be noted as integral to the notion of inspiration : "*atque ut tales ipsi Ecclesiae traditae sunt*" (Denzinger, No. 1787). But this explanation works from the elements of inspiration to describe instrumentality : it does not precisely start from "instrument" to reach the notion of inspiration.

Father A. Bea (*De inspiratione*, p. 41) notices one difficulty in applying the notion of instrument to the inspired author. It is that "we have not a straightforward instance of instrumentality, where the action is not attributed to the instrument, but to the principal agent, just as the bench is not said to be the work of the saw but of the carpenter"—appealing to St Thomas, *De veritate* xii.viii, 5 and *Summa* iii, xiii.iii. "For the sacred writers are and are always said to be truly

authors". This difficulty however is not serious, because, as Suarez remarks (*In Metaphys.* xvii.7), the principle that "the action is not attributed to the instrument" is valid at best of mechanical or artificial instruments: it does not hold good for rational instruments. "For we rightly say that men do absolve, consecrate, etc., by reason of a certain sovereignty which men exercise in these acts as masters of their actions". It will be noticed that human instrumentality seems inclined to shift easily into the region of the mysterious! But the consideration is sufficient to show that the fact that the sacred writers are called authors does not prevent their being instruments.

Another difficulty brings us closer to the kernel of the problem. It has been urged that where the instrumental cause is rational, the liberty of the agent must be taken into account. An irrational instrument is always moved *physically* by the principal cause, but a rational instrument can be moved physically only by God if his liberty is to be left intact. In other cases he is moved only by moral influences, such as command, persuasion, suggestion. But in every case, in so far as he is free, he finally is himself the efficacious cause of his being determined to act. And this seems to run counter to the notion of instrument, because in so far as any cause is an instrument, it is said to work "only in so far as it is impelled by the principal cause". Not only does the perennial question recur—how to reconcile the efficacious impulse of grace with the freedom of man (but from this we may safely prescind. Whether, with one school of thought, it is explained by physical premotion and predetermination, or with another by the *scientia media*, the problem of inspiration remains: why is the agent an instrument in the one case, and not in the other?). The other question arises, how can a free cause—which takes the initiative—be an instrumental cause?

The answer to this seems to be that a certain independence is not contrary to the nature of the instrument. If the precise reason of instrumentality was that the agent was moved by another, then every cause under God would be an instrument ("*quidquid movetur, ab alio movetur*"), and every agent in the world is moved by God. But we do not ordinarily, even in philosophy, say that everything is an instrument in the hands of God: least of all would we say, for instance, that when a man sees, God sees primarily through him. It is perfectly true that every instrument is moved by another agent, and a mechanical instrument *only* by another agent. But if the case arises that an instrument is *also* moved by itself, it does not cease thereby to be an instrument, because what is lacking—to be moved *solely* by another—is a property not confined to an instrument. Nothing distinctive or essential to the instrument is absent when it is under

some aspect independent. A man is still a man when he has no legs : because other things beside man have legs. But he would not be a man if he had no soul, and so we are invited to ask what is the precise essence, the *sine qua non*, of inspiration. In the meantime it may be assumed that the difficulty or mystery involved in man's freedom does not really touch his instrumentality and may be omitted from consideration.

We have, happily, nothing novel to bring in to explain the true nature of an instrument. St Thomas, *Summa*, III, LXXVII.iii, 3 ; or LXXIX.ii, 3 can be taken as the *locus classicus*, to which most treatises on inspiration have recourse. What makes something an instrument is that when set in motion by the principal agent it produces an *effectus potior* : a result of which it was itself incapable, but which it now produces by virtue of the force lent it by the higher power. Hence the commonplace that the natural activity of the instrument is "elevated" to an order beyond itself, as has been the common opinion of scholastic doctors : P. de Courtade appeals to Gonet, *Clypeus*, v, III.iii, 4 ; Goudin, *Phys. I*, II, IV.v. We add, to show that there is no ill-feeling between the schools on this point, Suarez, *In Metaphys.*, XVII.16 ff. For him likewise the instrumental cause is that which concurs or is elevated to produce an effect "*nobilior se*", that is, "something beyond the measure of its own perfection and action". He notes, with St Thomas, that the instrument puts forth its own force. St Thomas : "*Instrumentum non perficit instrumentalem actionem nisi exercendo propriam*" (III, LXII.i-ii). Suarez : "*Operatur quidem [instrumentum] in virtute superioris agentis, sed indiget aliqua virtute propria, alias non posset a tali re ulla actio prodire*". But whatever the contribution of the instrument, it is not adequately proportionate to the effect, it is insufficient, and it has power to produce the effect only according to the measure of force imparted to it by the higher agent. Hence Suarez concludes, in a formula which lends itself very well to the discussion of inspiration, that the motion (*concursum*) in question is not owed to the instrument in its own right, or for its own sake ; it is due only to the principal agent. "*Non instrumento proprie vel propter se debetur talis concursus*".

Because therefore the instrument is used for something beyond its own scope ("*ad effectum potioem, . . . nobiliorem*") what happens to it is not for its own sake or perfection. This is the analysis of the schools, and we cannot find fault with it. One simple consideration may be invoked to justify it further, if necessary. A thing is used, and is therefore an instrument, not just one in a series of co-ordinated causes, when it is subordinated to an end beyond itself. This rejoins the ordinary notion of a human instrument. We say someone has

been "used", "made a tool of", when he has been made to exert himself not for his own advantage, but for the benefit of someone else. We may therefore say that we have an instrument at work wherever an agent is set in motion not for its own sake but for the sake of another. And when an agent is applied to an action which is not sought for the perfection of that agent itself, the agent is at once subordinated to the effect. It is reduced to the status of a means for the simple reason that it is not treated as an end. In such cases, the effect must be allowed to be *potior*, *nobilior*, as the scholastic doctrine requires, and this is true even where the effect is within the power of the agent in the natural order. A man can make money anyway. But if he has been exploited to make money for another, the effect has been treated as better than the agent, at least in the eyes of the principal cause. The scholastic doctrine of instrumental causality, as summarised above, can obviously be applied to inspiration, for this is traditionally and authentically a "charismatic" influence. It is a *gratia gratis data*, not *gratum faciens*, as the general doctrine has it.

When, therefore, we say that the effect of an instrumental cause is something to which the instrument was of itself unequal, we must remember that the disparity or excess, so to speak, in the effect must be understood primarily of the order of dignity, value. The "plus" in the result need not be in the physical order. Instrumentality is there if the effect be in some way superior to the immediate agent. And this seems to us to be most important for inspiration, because if an effect beyond the natural powers of man is looked for in inspiration, it becomes, it seems, impossible to verify instrumentality there. For inspiration is essentially the same in every line of the Bible—including the *obiter dicta*, as has been put beyond question by the Encyclical *Divino afflante*. And if we take a standard *obiter dictum*, "Bring me the cloak which I left with Carpus in Troad" (II Tim. iv.13), we shall ask ourselves in vain how such a sentence requires any "mysterious" elevation of the powers of St Paul.

How is such a sentence "*potior*" or "*nobilior*" than the natural powers ("*propria virtus*") of St Paul? The "elevation" of his powers by actual (salutary) grace can hardly be said to be demanded for such a sentence. Actual grace is not required, but neither would it be enough to give inspiration, because the Church refuses to call books written under the elevation of actual grace inspired in the sense of sacred and canonical. Is the "elevation" of his powers by the preternatural force given to a miracle-worker required? "I left my cloak in Troad" is not a piece of miraculous wisdom or a preternatural feat of memory! It is obviously something that could be said by anyone using his natural powers, and hence the comparison of inspiration with

the waters that healed leprosy, etc., seems uncalled for. Undoubtedly St Paul's intellect was illuminated by a preternatural impulse to form the judgment, otherwise it would not be inspired. But the question precisely is, where does this preternatural element act?

The answer commonly given is that when treating such accessible matters and facts of memory the inspired author judges of the natural truth in question by means of "a divine light". He contemplates them "*secundum divinam veritatem*", "*secundum certitudinem divinam*", for which St Thomas, 2-II, CLXXI.vi; CLXXIV.ii, iii is constantly cited. So P. Courtade (*Dict. de la Bible, Suppl., VOL. IV, col. 514*): God can accord our understanding a vigour, a sharpness, a clear-sightedness of a superior kind ("*une vigueur, une acuité, une perspicacité supérieures*"). This is precisely what He does for the hagiographers. Courtade adds more references to St Thomas to reinforce the statement. We beg leave to doubt that this is precisely what God does, or that the opinion of St Thomas can be adduced for it.

In what intelligible sense can it be said that St Paul made the judgment "I left my cloak in Troad" with a preternatural vigour, sharpness, clear-sightedness? Had he a better and clearer view on the subject of the cloak than his companions? To say he remembered it better is gratuitous. Are we perhaps to think that he had a divine light on the nature of the cloak, like a Platonic view of the form of a cloak? Did he understand better than his companions what a cloak was? All attempts to give sense to the judgment "*secundum divinam veritatem*" on the cloak lead nowhere, at least on this road. And as for St Thomas, it can only be regretted that the Doctor Communis is made once more to say something which, as far as can be seen, he never dreamt of. In all the passages so frequently cited in this connexion St Thomas is speaking of judgments formed not under the light of inspiration, but under the light of revelation. And the day is surely gone by when revelation and inspiration can be confused! Undoubtedly St Thomas insists on the "divine certainty" with which the prophet judges even natural truths, but he is talking of the transmission of revelation as such, where the prophet has the consciousness that God is speaking to him. Any standard scholastic treatise on revelation explains that there are two judgments in revelation, both produced by God in the mind of the subject. One judgment may be represented as "this is so", the second as "God says this to me"; and it is the latter that gives the mind divine certainty. Except in the probably rare cases where the sacred writer was conscious of his inspiration, the latter judgment, "God says this to me", is absent in inspiration and hence there is no reason to say that the sacred writer judges what he writes with a divine certainty, "a preternatural vigour of mind".

St Thomas does not treat inspiration expressly in the passages from which the tessera "*judicat secundum divinam certitudinem*" is taken, and therefore cannot be invoked to decide the case. He does speak of judgments formed "*sub instinctu prophetico*" where the prophet is not sure of himself: we may hazard the guess that if the precise question of the mind of the hagiographer had come up, St Thomas would have treated it under the heading of a prophetic instinct—2-II, CLXXI.v ; CLXXIII.iv—rather than of divine certitude.

We conclude then that it is unsound to appeal to a "divine" light in the mind of the sacred writer to assign to inspiration an effect to which the author was unequal and for which therefore an "elevation" was required. We have excluded the simple light of grace, and we have excluded the light of miraculous insight. What then is the "*potior*" or "*nobler*" result of inspiration? It seems to be simply this: since an agent is an instrument if he is impelled to action not for his own benefit or perfection but for the sake of another, the hagiographer becomes an instrument under any concursus which is given him not for his own sake but for the sake of the kingdom of God. Since he is impelled to write not for his private personal perfection but for the public common good, he is no longer an end but a means, and therefore the result must be considered as higher and nobler than himself, since the means is always of a lower order than the end. God uses him, and thereby elevates him, to produce an effect which God puts first.

If God then gives actual efficacious and salutary grace to a sacred author, which must have been ordinarily the case, since presumably the author merited by writing inspired books, the primary end of this grace was not the personal progress of the writer but the good of the Church. That the grace also perfected the author was merely concomitant, not primarily intended, and in so far as the author used the grace for his own good, he was not in this respect inspired. He was inspired because "*per se*" the grace subordinated him to the public good, "*per accidens*" did him good.

The public good for which provision was thus made was in fact attained when the book in question was "handed to the Church as inspired" (Vatican Council), or, to put it another way, when its inspiration became known. And therefore the grace of inspiration, no different presumably from any actual efficacious grace, was given in view of the subsequent revelation, to be made to the Church, of the giving of this grace. That is how an inspired book differs essentially from the solemn writings of a Council or Pope: since no public revelation is given after the death of the last apostle, the positive help given possibly by God for the writing of a solemn definition is not

given in view of a subsequent revelation of its existence : so there can be no more inspired books. We come back therefore to the difference between inspiration and actual grace which is the standard doctrine : inspiration differs from actual grace by its end and object (*cf.* Bea, *De inspiratione*, p. 38). The end and object of inspiration is the public good primarily : and hence the sacred author is the instrument when he receives such a grace. His own good is only secondary. The end and object of actual grace is primarily the private good of the individual who receives it. The public good, also inevitably involved, is secondary, and hence the subject is not an instrument. The sacred author is therefore the instrument to an end nobler than himself—the word of God—not just because he is enlightened, impelled and assisted by God, but because he is enlightened, impelled and assisted for the sake of something outside and beyond himself, the building up of the body of Christ. And this public good is assured not so much by the content of his writings—there may well be as much and more in the definitions of the Councils—as by the divine seal of God’s good pleasure set upon them when He handed them to the Church as inspired and thereby guaranteed them, as He did no other books, as “useful for teaching, refuting, instruction and correction”. The books are therefore only really sacred and living in the stream of the life of the Church : hence the importance of that element of the Vatican’s description of inspiration to which we called attention at the beginning : the Scriptures are sacred because they have been inspired by the Holy Ghost—and handed to the Church as such. For their actual production, there is no need to look for mysterious miracles of the type of the physical causality of the sacraments. The primary miracle of the books—apart from the revelation which they actually contain but which is not of the essence of inspiration—is the apostolic revelation of the fact that God gave “ordinary” actual grace to produce them : but such a revelation is no ordinary thing, and will never occur again.

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