

The German Positive School

By Brother David Mary, M.I.C.M., Tert.

From the HouseTops Spring 2003 No. 57

The Catechism's first question has to do with the reason for man's existence on Earth.

Q: For what end are we in this world?

A: We are in this world that we may know God, love Him, and serve Him, and thereby attain Heaven.

As the Catechism further teaches, to know God is to get a right knowledge of God, and this is found in those things that God has revealed to us, that is, in the Catholic Faith.

As the first Vatican Council taught, "God, the beginning and end of all things, may be certainly known by the natural light of human reason, by means of created things. But it pleased His wisdom and bounty to reveal Himself and the eternal decrees of His will to mankind by another and supernatural way, by speaking, in times past, through His prophets, and last of all by His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

"We owe it to this divine teaching that among things divine such truths as of themselves are not beyond human reason can, even in the present condition of mankind, be known by everyone with ease, with certainty, and with no admixture of error."

This divine revelation is "contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which, received by the Apostles themselves, from the dictation of the Holy Spirit, transmitted as it were, from hand to hand, has come down even to us." (Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Ch. 11, Vatican Council I)

Our Knowledge of God is Based on Theology

Now, "theology", (from the Greek Theos, "God" and logos, "word," or, loosely, "study") is the science treating of the knowledge of God and of divine things.

Of theology, Father Joseph Pohle, professor of dogmatic theology, wrote: "If defined as the science concerning God (doctrina de Deo), the name of theology applies as well to the philosophical knowledge of God, which is cast into scientific form in natural theology or theodicy. However, unless theodicy is free from errors, it cannot lay claim to the name of theology. For this reason, pagan mythology and pagan doctrines about the gods, must at once be set aside as false theology. The theology of heretics also, so far as it contains grave errors, must be excluded. In a higher and more perfect sense we call theology that science of God and divine things that, objectively, is based on supernatural revelation, and subjectively, is viewed in the light of Christian faith. Theology thus broadens out into Christian doctrine (doctrina fidei) and embraces not only the particular doctrines of God's existence, essence, and triune personality, but all the truths revealed by God. ...

"[T]heology comprehends all those and only those doctrines which are to be found in the sources of faith, namely Scripture and Tradition, and which the infallible Church proposes to us."

Positive and Speculative Theology

There are different kinds of dogmatic theology. There is the most fundamental type - the positive or nonspeculative type, and then there is the speculative type. I will briefly discuss these two types.

Father Pohle writes:

"The subject-matter with which the student of theology has to deal is offered to him in the deposit of faith and, reduced to its briefest form, is to be found in the Catechism. If the theologian is content with deriving the dogmas from the sources of faith and with explaining them, he is occupied with 'positive' theology. Guided by the doctrinal authority of the Church, he calls history and criticism to his aid to find in Scripture and Tradition the genuine unalloyed

truth. If to this positive element is joined a polemic tendency, we have 'controversial' theology, which was carried to its highest perfection in the seventeenth century by St. Robert Bellarmine.

"Positive theology must prove its theses by conclusive arguments drawn from Scripture and Tradition; hence it is closely related to exegesis [the explanation of Scripture] and history. As exegete, the theologian must first of all accept the inspiration of the Bible as the Word of God. But even when elucidating its meaning, he will always bear in mind the unanimous interpretation of the Fathers, the hermeneutical [interpretative] principles of the Church, and the directions of the Holy See. In his character as historian, the theologian must not lay aside his belief in the supernatural origin of Christianity and in the Divine institution of the Church, if he is to give a true and objective account of tradition, of the history of dogma, and of patrology [study of the Fathers of the Church]. For, just as the Bible, being the Word of God was written under the immediate inspiration of the Holy Ghost, so Tradition was, and is, guided in a special manner by God, Who preserves it from being curtailed, mutilated or falsified."

As for the second kind of theology, the speculative, Father Pohle states:

"When the dogmatic material with the help of the historical method has been derived from its sources, another momentous task awaits the theologian: the philosophical appreciation, the speculative examination and elucidation of the material brought to light. This is the purpose of the 'scholastic' method from which 'scholastic theology' takes its name.

"The scope of the scholastic method is fourfold: to open up completely the content of dogma and to analyze it by means of dialectics [logic]; to establish a logical connection between the various dogmas and to unite them in a well-knit system; to derive new truths, called 'theological conclusions' from the premises by syllogistic reasoning; and to find reasons, analogies, congruous arguments for the dogmas.

"But above all to show that the mysteries of faith, though beyond the reach of reason, are not contrary to its laws, but can be made acceptable to our intellect. It is evident that the ultimate purpose of these philosophical speculations

cannot be to resolve dogma finally into mere natural truths, or to strip the mysteries of their supernatural character, but to explain the truths of faith, to provide for them a philosophical basis, to bring them nearer to the human mind. Faith must ever remain the solid rock-bottom on which reason builds up, and faith in its turn strives after understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Hence the famous axiom of St. Anselm of Canterbury: *Credo ut intellegam* ["I believe in order that I may understand"]. However highly one may esteem the results of positive theology, one thing is certain: the scientific character of dogmatic theology does not rest so much on the exactness of its exegetical and historical proofs as on the philosophical grasp of the content of dogma. But in attempting this task, the theologian cannot look for aid to modern philosophy with its endless confusion, but to the glorious past of his own science. What else are the modern systems of philosophy, sceptical criticism, Positivism, Pantheism, Monism, etc., than ancient errors cast into new moulds? Rightly does Catholic theology cling to the only true and eternal philosophy of common sense, which was established by Divine Providence in the Socratic School, carried to its highest perfection by Plato and Aristotle, purified from the minutest traces of error by the Scholastics of the thirteenth century."

So, for our knowledge of God, we see the importance of first obtaining the "genuine unalloyed truth" from Scripture and Tradition. As Tradition is the passing down of the knowledge from age to age, the role of history is critical, as is the study of the Church Fathers. Furthermore, what the Church has promulgated through the ages is an invaluable guide to these sciences.

Over and above this obtainment is the philosophic appreciation of those truths found in Scripture and Tradition. This is highly important; if we think correctly about what is found in Scripture and Tradition, we may properly understand what we are given to believe.

The Fall of Catholic Theology

The history of the world is replete with philosophies of all kinds, most of which are false. Philosophic perennis, "the wisdom of the ages," is the true philosophy, and it reached its zenith in the Ages of Faith.

Since that time, Speculative Theology has been perverted with the introduction of the Renaissance, the Protestant Revolt, and the Enlightenment.

However, up to the 18th century, positive theology grew in force and stature. During the Protestant Revolt, for example, many great Catholic polemicists defended the Faith against the errors of the time. Father Pohle mentioned St. Robert Bellarmine above. St. Robert carried controversial theology to its highest perfection. There is no other theologian who has defended almost the whole of Catholic dogma against the attacks of the Reformers with such clearness and convincing force.

The development of positive theology went hand in hand with the progress of research into the Patristic Era and into the history of dogma.

Following the 1600s, the introduction of Cartesianism (Rene Descartes' philosophy) in philosophy, and Gallicanism and Jansenism in theology, eroded the influence of Scholastic Theology. In the period from the mid-1600s to the late 1700s, there were some great scholastic works in theology, but beginning in the latter part of the 18th century, Catholic Theology as a whole was in steep decline.

This was brought on by a number of causes: the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773 deprived theology of some of its ablest representatives; the paralyzing influence of the "Enlightenment", which arose through English Deism, deluged all the European countries; and the devastation caused by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars made scientific enquiry practically impossible.

In Germany, added to this mix, there was the growing influence of the Subjectivism of Immanuel Kant, and the Historicism of Frederick Hegel. These systems denied reality in any objective or absolute way (Kant) and made history relativistic and pantheistic (Hegel). Both engendered an undisguised contempt for Scholasticism and for St. Thomas Aquinas.

Along with the Protestant government, the Illuminati in Germany greatly oppressed the Catholic Church. Germany was where the decline in Catholic Theology had progressed the farthest, and it was in Catholic Germany that the

reawakening and revival of Catholic Theology would receive its greatest impulse.

The German School and the Revival of Catholic Theology

There are several ways by which the revival of Catholic Theology took place in Europe at this time, i.e. the early 19th century.

Each country on the continent had its own heroes when it came to the revival of Catholicity. For our purposes, we will examine the German contribution, which has arguably had the most powerful and enduring legacy.

Catholic history professors Thomas Neill and Raymond Schmandt wrote: "This [German] revival is remarkable in that it was exclusively the work of laymen, scholars who joined the Church and promoted its interests despite the lack of ecclesiastical leadership in the Germanies. It is also remarkable in that it did not depend on state support; in fact it rose in opposition to the German governments and was therefore always free from their control. The lay revival forced German bishops to give up their Josephist {Named after Emperor Joseph II k 174190), this was German manifestation of the same heresy that was ravaging much of "enlightenment" Europe. The Church, said the heretics, should be national, i.e., run by bishops servile to the state and independent of Rome} tendencies and to resist the German prince in obedience to Rome. And from this lay revival were formed centers of Catholicism..."

Father John Laux adds: "The centers of the Catholic revival were Munster in Westphalia, Landshut in Bavaria, Mainz, Munich, and Vienna. Here the men and women whose names should be dear to every Catholic heart gathered in friendly circles, discussed the needs of the Church, wrote works of enduring value, and were in their own daily lives illustrious examples of the living, transforming power of Christianity.

"In Vienna St. Clement Maria Hofbauer, the second founder of the Redemptorists, attracted the best minds of the capital around him and was such a mighty power for good that he has been styled the Apostle of Vienna. Among those who felt his influence most were the philosopher and historian Frederick von Schlegel and his wife Dorothea, the poet Eichendorff, the dramatist and

pulpit orator Zacharias Werner, the political economist Adam Muller, and the painter Philip Veit.

"In Munster we meet the pioneers of modern pedagogy, Franz von Furstenberg and Bernard Overberg, Church historian Leopold von Stolberg, the noble and talented Princess Amalia von Gallitzin, the mother of the renowned American missionary Prince Demetrius Gallitzin.. ."

From Munster, John Michael Sailer carried the revival to Landshut in Bavaria. He trained the candidates for the priesthood in the true Catholic spirit, and by his numerous writings and the charm of his saintly personality profoundly influenced thousands of his contemporaries and brought many Protestants back to the Catholic fold. He became a bishop in 1829.

In 1825. Prince Louis I of Bavaria, transferred the Landshut college to Munich to make of it a truly Catholic university. He summoned Joseph von Gorres to become professor and to preside over an extra-curricular academy of Catholic scholars. Gorres and his friends carried Catholic principles into the State University and laid the foundations of German Catholic scholarship which was to mean so much to the Catholic cause throughout the world.

Against Hegel's pantheistic and relativistic view of history, Gorres pleaded for a Christian interpretation of historical development.

In Mainz, Bruno Liebermann founded the Catholic monthly *Der Katholik*, which, with the *Historisch Politische Blaetter* of Gorres, became the chief exponent of Catholic ideas in Germany.

Among the disciples of Joseph von Gorres at Munich we find such names as Georg Phillips and Karl May, lay experts in both civil and canon law; Father Joseph Allioli, translator of a new Catholic German version of the Bible; Father Johann Mohler, theologian and patrologist; and Johann Ignaz Dollinger, the brilliant but caustic historical scholar, who did good work before becoming an "Old Catholic" apostate. Theirs was to be a vocation in line with Bishop Sailer's ideal for the men of the 19^o century when ecclesiastics "must know more, do more, and be ready to suffer more" than times past.

Johann Adam Mohler

In Tübingen Father Johann Mohler, along with Johann Sebastian Drey, founded the Catholic historical school, which school was known for its positive and historical emphasis on theology more so than the speculative and philosophical. This school maintained high standards of historical scholarship and patristic theology.

Father Mohler was a student of ecclesiastical life in the early and medieval times. Naturally this led him to an examination of the distinctive differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. He examined the differences through the study of the "symbolism," the theological science that compares one religious system with another on the basis of their creeds, and thus demonstrates the truth or falsity of a particular creed. ("Symbol," in this use, is another word for creed.)

Father Mohler, a doctor of theology, in his classic work *Symbolik*, {Short for *Symbolik oder Darstellung der dogmatischen Gegensätze der Katholiken und Protestanten nach ihren öffentlichen Bekenntnisschriften*, which translates roughly to *Symbolism: or Exposition of Doctrinal Differences between Catholics and Protestants, as evidenced by their Symbolical Writings*} demonstrated that there could be no incompatibility between what was truly rational and what was truly Christian, both finding their sole, direct, and entirely adequate expression in Catholic dogma.

As well, he was persuaded that a knowledge of the real character of the great religious conflict between Catholicity and Protestantism, based on the genuine and original documents, was a necessary preliminary to any definite appeal to the tribunal of truth. Such investigations seemed to him important, not only for theologians, but also for every true scholar, the truth being nowhere as important as in matters of faith.

Father Heinrich Schlager wrote: "[Father Mohler] was always greatly devoted to the study of the Church Fathers and Church history, and in his lectures often drew attention to the literary treasures of Christian antiquity. To him [the Fathers] stood as the unbroken series of witnesses to the doctrine, worship,

and constitution of the Church - the successive evidences of her many victories..."

Karl Joseph von Hefele

When Father Mohler left for the University of Munich in 1835, Karl von Hefele was appointed to the department of Church history at Tübingen, thus succeeding Mohler in that position. Like his predecessor, he brought with him an unswerving devotion to the Catholic Church and a high degree of enthusiasm. He was endowed with rare gifts as a teacher: an excellent memory, a clear understanding, earnest affection for his pupils, and a diction at once simple and beautiful. His lectures were frequented by hundreds of students from all parts of Germany and Switzerland. Hefele is most famous for his work on the history of the Councils of the Catholic Church. Contained in seven volumes, the *Conciliengeschichte* embraces the history of dogma, canon law, liturgy, ecclesiastical discipline, and political history. A successor to Hefele at Tübingen, Father Von Funk described the effort as one of the most detailed and thorough works on church history."

Consecrated bishop in 1869, Hefele was summoned to Rome to be a consultor for Vatican Council I.

Heinrich Joseph Denzinger

In the following generation, the mid - to late 1800s, Father Denzinger, a doctor of Philosophy, carried on Father Mohler's methods and helped to establish what is the special character of the German school - exact investigation of the historical development of theology, rather than philosophical speculation about the corollaries of dogma. Nearly all his important works are in the nature of historic theology.

Most useful is his *Enchiridion Symbolorum et Definitionum* (commonly known in the English-speaking world as Denzinger's), a handbook containing a collection of official creeds, the chief decrees and definitions of councils, lists of condemned propositions, etc., beginning with the oldest forms of the Apostles' Creed.

Josef Fessler

A professor of ecclesiastical history and canon law at Brixen in Austria, in 1848, he published the wellknown patrological work *Institutiones Patrologiae, quas ad frequentiore[m] utiliorem et faciliorem SS. Patrum lectionem promovendam concinnavit J. Fessler*, which volume superseded the unfinished books on the Church Fathers by Fathers Johann Mohler and Franz Michael Permaneder. Bishop Fessler was appointed Secretary to the Vatican Council by Pope Plus IX. As Father John Chapman, O.S.B. points out: "It was certainly wise to choose a prelate whose vast and intimate acquaintance with the Fathers and with ecclesiastical history was equaled only by his thorough knowledge of canon law."

Regarding patrology — the study of the Church Fathers — Bishop Fessler distinguished between *patrologia* and *patristica*. He defined *patrologia* as the science which provides all that is necessary for the using of the works of the Fathers, dealing, therefore, with their authority, the criteria for judging their genuineness, the difficulties to be met with in them, and the rules for their use. As for *patristica*, Bishop Fessler described it as that theological science by which all that concerns faith, morals, or discipline in the writings of the Fathers is collected and sorted. When treating of patrology today, these distinctions are not much used, but one sees the exactness and precision by which this learned scholar approached the subject.

Franz Michael Permaneder

After his days as a student of theology and jurisprudence at Landshut, Father Permaneder was appointed as professor of church history and canon law at the Lyceum of Freising, and in 1847 he joined the theological faculty of the University of Munich. He worked with Father Mohler in the field of patrology.

Ludwig Freiherr von Pastor

The German, Father Ludwig von Pastor (d.1928), was professor of history at Innsbruck in Austria, and he authored *The History of the Popes, From the Close of the Middle Ages Drawn from the Secret Archives of the Vatican and Other Original Sources*. Combining the most painstaking scholarship and

erudition, and being privileged with access to the secret archives of the Vatican, Father von Pastor put together the most authoritative history of the Popes. It is stated that von Pastor's theme throughout the histories is that the shortcomings of the papacy reflected the flaws of the age.

Positive Theology and Modernism

The German revival in the field of Catholic Theology, notably in its positive aspects, helped to serve as a defense against the coming of Modernism in the world. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, the philosophical systems of Immanuel Kant and G. W. Frederick Hegel were the precursors to this "synthesis of all heresies." True history was being attacked; dogmas were put into doubt by a relativistic thought process about history; the Church Fathers were despised as outdated; and the Bible was thought of as just another good book among many good books.

In essence, this German effort helped save for the Church a true view of the history of the Church and a proper grasp of Catholic Tradition. It has given us the proper way to view Holy Scripture by turning on the light of the Church Fathers and the Church's own understanding of its inspired text. Thanks to the German school of positive theology, we have at our grasp the necessary tools with which to attack the errors of the modern world, for the Hegelian and Kantian ideas are still with us, still trying to confuse and dissemble all that is true.