

Proper Theological Method Prevents Enormous Problems

By Dr. Jeff Mirus ([bio](#) - [articles](#) - [email](#)) | May 03, 2013

The late Fr. William Most—the theologian and Scripture scholar represented in our special [Most Collection](#)—influenced me in many ways. One of the most valuable lessons he taught me was a fundamental principle of theological method in resolving apparent differences in Magisterial teachings over the centuries. It is a lesson I’ve repeated many times in my writings here; it appears in the sixth position below.

But now I’d like to explore theological method a little more, in order to set forth the basic principles according to which theology must proceed if it is to yield any reliable results at all. The vast majority of people who have called themselves “theologians” have not followed these bedrock principles. But every faithful Catholic theologian has. Failure to observe them is a failure of the method proper to the discipline of theology. The outcome is the same as for the failure of a scientist to employ the scientific method or to exercise proper controls in an experiment: *Wildly incorrect results*.

Here are the basic principles of proper theological method:

1. **The Necessity of Revelation:** Any conception of God worthy of the name is so far beyond human understanding that, unless He reveals Himself to us, we can know very little about him. Without Revelation, we are limited to reasoning inductively from God’s creation, which cannot take us very far in our understanding of God Himself. This is sometimes called “natural theology”, and it is really simply an extension of human philosophy.
2. **Verification of Revelation:** Obviously, then, any significant knowledge of God is only as good as the Revelation we receive. The work of theology, in order to make sense, presupposes an authentic Revelation.

But Revelation can be authenticated only if it is (a) public; and (b) accompanied by signs and/or “wonders” which can be explained only by divine intervention. Only two religions actually claim to be based on a verifiable revelation, namely Judaism and Christianity. But in any case, every credible theologian must satisfy himself that the Revelation which is the object of his study is worthy of his faith.

3. **The Centrality of Faith:** I introduce the concept of “faith” at this point because, faced with a Revelation he finds credible, the person puts his faith in “God revealing”—who (as the common expression goes) can neither deceive nor be deceived. This concept of faith includes trust in God, obedience to his commands, and adherence to the truth of what God has revealed. This is why the classic definition of theology is “faith seeking understanding”. To study the Revelation without faith might qualify as historical or literary criticism, but it is not theology. One cannot “do” theology without faith.
4. **The Authority Principle:** For religious doctrine to be definitive, there must be an authority that can settle disputed points concerning Revelation. Any set of truths committed to the human community through Revelation will gradually change over time as these truths pass through many theological minds in various cultures. The only way to distinguish without doubt between legitimate developments and corruptions is through an authority which can pass definitive judgment. Thus if God wishes to provide a definitive Revelation, He must also provide an interpretive authority through time. Only Catholicism claims such an authority, and just as such an authority is logically a critical feature of any fruitful theology, acceptance of this authority is a critical mark of Catholic theology. That is, Catholic theology is quite simply impossible without acceptance of the teaching authority, or Magisterium, of Peter and his successors.
5. **Cultural Transcendence:** What I have outlined so far implies that God’s own self-disclosure in Revelation has an objective meaning for all times and places, even if it is

difficult for human persons to explore that meaning outside the understandings, categories and prejudices which are native to their own cultures. It is precisely the business of theology to develop an ever-increasing understanding of that objective and culturally-transcendent meaning so that Revelation can be more effectively applied to the deficiencies of time and place. If the purpose of theology were simply to give fresh expression, in shifting culture-bound categories, to the human thirst for God, then theology would take or leave the objective Revelation according to its own self-contained musings. The result would be nothing but natural theology illuminated here and there by whatever revelatory data the theologian finds congenial at the moment. The violation of this principle of the cultural transcendence of Revelation is the essence of Modernism.

6. **The Analogy of Faith:** The Catholic understanding of Revelation is that theological inquiry finds the data of Revelation in three places: Scripture, Tradition, and the teachings of the Magisterium. By what is often called the analogy of faith, it is understood that because God Himself guarantees the truth of all three sets of data, there can rather obviously be no contradiction among them, and what we learn from one source enlightens us further with regard to the others. Thus it is not possible to “prefer” what Scripture says to aspects of Revelation which have been committed to the Church through Tradition, or *vice versa*. Similarly, it is impossible to “prefer” Scripture to the Magisterium, or Tradition to the Magisterium, or the Magisterium to either Scripture or Tradition. Since all sources are necessarily true, a proper theological understanding of a particular point is *always an understanding which recognizes and utilizes the truth of the data from all three sources*.

Common Methodological Errors Today

A violation of any of these principles constitutes a failure of theological method which must, except for an accident, produce erroneous results.

Unsurprisingly, with these principles in mind it is relatively easy to spot the most common errors of theological method today. I will mention just three of them. All three are also reflected in the lives of Catholics who, while not theologians, seek to justify in various ways their quarrels with the Church.

First, theologians contaminated with Modernism substitute the intellectual fashions of a particular culture for the objective character of Revelation, as if cultural categories are supposed to purify and elevate God’s self-disclosure rather than the other way around. In a Modernist system, the theologian becomes a sort of high priest of human culture, the inspired interpreter of the inclinations of the age. Rather than interpreting God to man, the Modernist hubristically seeks to interpret man to God.

Second, theologians who misunderstand or reject the Magisterium of the Church—often arguing that the Magisterium really consists of the broad agreement of theological experts or the widespread opinions of Catholics throughout the Church at a particular time—tend toward the same results as those more formally contaminated with Modernism. It is inescapable that wherever doctrinal authority is rejected, more theologians than not will find themselves arguing in favor of whatever ideas seem most enlightened to the dominant culture in their own place and time—unless, of course, they simply have peculiar quirks all their own.

Third, often as a reaction against the changeable “revelations” produced by the first two methodological errors, some theologians misunderstand the sources of Revelatory data, and find themselves arguing that an older understanding of Revelation is sufficient to discount the authority of the Magisterium whenever a pope or ecumenical council teaches something which appears to be different. The argument here is that the pope possesses authority only when he says the same thing as has been said in the past.

This last example is a failure of theological method because it puts a preconceived notion of the meaning of Revelation ahead of the actual data of the Revelation itself. No definitive increase in the Christian understanding of Revelation would ever have been possible under such a theory, for every increase in understanding results from a focus on new connections or previously unarticulated aspects

of the whole truth. Correct method demands that the Magisterial weight of a new statement be determined first. Then, if it is indeed authoritative, it is an additional datum of Revelation to which our own limited understanding must adjust.



Conclusion

Again, the Catholic understanding of any point of Revelation must be adjusted to admit the truth of all the data from Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium which bear upon the issue. Because Revelation is a finite representation of an infinite whole, the chief progress of theology consists in figuring out how the various points that have been revealed actually connect together to shed still greater light. But sometimes a theologian cannot see how two or more of these data of Revelation fit together.

For example, St. Thomas Aquinas, developed two different lines of thought concerning grace and salvation, based on his study of Scripture. These suggested two somewhat different conclusions about whom God saves and whom God damns, and how. In the end, St. Thomas refused to drop one in favor of the other, admitting that he did not know how to reconcile them. Instead, he accepted that the points of Revelation which had thus confused him were, in fact, both certainly true. He understood that they both pointed to the same larger truth, a truth as yet not fully understood. As is often the case, it belonged to later generations of theologians to find ways to harmonize some of these Scriptural issues in accordance with the Magisterium of the Church. (A full discussion of this issue may be found in Fr. William Most's [Grace, Predestination and the Salvific Will of God.](#))

St. Thomas, like all good theologians, displayed a humility before Revelation. He never tried to use it for his own purposes or his own preferences. It is precisely this which proper theological method prevents. The proper method rejoices in the gifts of the Magisterium which are essential to the task. The proper method permits fruitful debates and mutual exchange among theologians in areas of uncertainty. And most importantly, the proper method ensures that Revelation remains God's own self-disclosure, and not our own.

Jeffrey Mirus holds a Ph.D. in intellectual history from Princeton University. A co-founder of Christendom College, he also pioneered Catholic Internet services. He is the founder of Trinity Communications and CatholicCulture.org. [See full bio.](#)

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