

# *The Failure of “Tradition-Conscious” Reasoning in Sedevacantist Theology*

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## **Introduction**

Sedevacantist theology positions itself as the ultimate, most puritan continuation of the Catholic tradition, with all popes following Pope Pius XII, and Vatican II, being “invalid” in accordance with their perceived criteria; their ecclesiology claims to remain faithful to the first Bishop of Rome, St Peter, the loyalties bestowed upon him by Jesus Christ, and the core Christian ethica of the Bible. This is the undying conviction of sedevacantism. Yet its basic argumentative structure reveals an entirely different dynamic—sedevacantism itself presupposes a mode of interpretation that is incompatible with the epistemic conditions under which wider Christian theology ordinarily operates, and, arguably, the most invaluable Christian principle of all: epistemic humility, or rather, a “hermeneutic of humility”.

The central difficulty as such is not its conclusion that the post-Vatican II papacy is invalid, as mentioned, but the epistemic posture that one assumes to reach such a conclusion. Sedevacantism depends on a form of interpretive certainty that cannot be met with the kind of “tradition-conscious” reasoning described by academics like Newman, Congar, or more recently by theologians influenced by Ricœur and Lonergan—but of utmost importance to the believer, the sort of reasoning described by the Bible’s nature in itself. Christian knowledge is found within a complex netting of mediation, and such mediation structures this epistemic humility appropriate to theological inquiry. The impossibility of isolating the Bible from its wider historical and cultural contexts for our understanding of it as a text necessarily demands from each reader or interpreter that they adopt this tradition-conscious reasoning that is positive towards hermeneutics. Sedevacantism, by contrast, operates on a conception of tradition as an entirely closed and readily intelligible deposit whose authentic meaning is immediately recoverable by the individual believer within himself. Although many may argue that the denial of the papacy is not heretical in itself, and that the schismatic nature of sedevacantism is its true heresy, I find that the more egregious and erroneous conviction of sedevacantism—its most significant and damning heresy—is its denial of tradition-conscious reasoning.

Before I continue, however, a preliminary methodological clarification is required. Invariably, most, if not all, sedevacantist accounts identify Pius XII as the final legitimate Bishop of Rome. This inevitably raises questions about his conduct as a Pope—his time during the Second World War, his diplomatic strategies, and all historiographical disputes surrounding his responses to the Germans’ Nazism. It is a given that these issues are extremely pertinent for understanding mid-century Catholicism, but they are not directly relevant to the argument developed here. The present analysis brackets such historical concerns in order to examine sedevacantism as a *theological* claim about the Church’s failure and as an *epistemological* claim about how doctrinal error is identifiable. This sort of abstraction is justified as the question at hand is conceptual in dealing with whether the criteria sedevacantism employs is coherent within a truly Christian account of how theological knowledge is formed.

## Epistemic Humility in Christian Faith

It is most intuitive to me that Christian knowledge is inseparable from the epistemic conditions constituted by the textual and historical mediation of revelation. The Bible does not present itself as an immediate and fully transparent deposit of divine propositions; rather, when the interpreter reads Scripture, he is presented with a complex and historically sedimented reality whose authority is inextricable from the hermeneutical processes of its reception and transmission. These processes can be understood as redaction, canonical formation, liturgical use, interpretive elaboration within the largely synodal community of the Church, and so forth. Knowledge of God, if such a thing is to exist, therefore, is *never* the product of private cognition or intuitive apprehension; knowledge of God is established through a mediation that demonstrably shows the interpreter the breadth and limits of human comprehension.

The epistemic posture to proper Christian theology, as such, is not optional or contingent. It is inscribed in the very nature of revelation itself. Intellectual humility arises ontologically from the mediated character of Scripture as opposed to being any given psychological disposition or personal conviction appended to the interpreter himself. An appreciation or acknowledgement of biblical hermeneutics in its illustration of how the Bible was formed through a diversity of mythologies and theologies is therefore not comparable to, say, a moral conviction:

Consider moral conviction in the case of pacifism.

A pacifist deliberately orients their moral perspective around the rejection of war and violence; this rejection thus shapes perception, choices, and his understanding of social and political reality. A pacifist's reception of any given event related to his conviction will always, first and foremost, be shaped by his ideological commitment before anything else, and this initial perception will therefore differ from a non-pacifist's. Importantly, pacifism is a contingent, evaluative position that one may wilfully adopt or reject, and it can be questioned, revised, or abandoned without violating the integrity of moral reality itself. In any given case, the only moral reality impacted by any of these situations is those who hold the conviction of pacifism. Therefore, pacifism is a non-constitutive, ideological commitment: it constraints the pacifist's worldview, but it does not constitute the very conditions of possible moral reality. This much is obvious. By contrast, the humility demanded by Scripture *is* constitutive of knowledge itself. One cannot simply "choose" to either possess or dispense with it without undermining the act of apprehension and the nature of Scripture; this humility is a Christian precondition for legitimate engagement with the Bible. Indeed, intellectual humility shapes the framework within which Christian knowledge becomes possible, similar to how pacifism shapes a proponent's moral framework. Yet unlike pacifism, it is not contingent—to attempt to apprehend revelation without this humility is to engage in a Christian category error in mistaking possession for participation.

A Christian cannot ignore the nature of the Bible to thereby make claims about the Bible, as "supported" by the Bible. Whereas moral convictions modify how one interacts with the world, this intellectual humility derived from Scripture structures the very possibility of knowing God. It is therefore epistemically *necessary* for a Christian, non-negotiable, and constitutive. In this sense, intellectual humility in the Christian context is more than a mere virtue or preferable academic position for a theologian or believer to assume. It is an epistemic *sine qua non*. Humility before revelation is an involuntary condition of intelligibility as imposed by the mediation of Scripture. Further, since there is a clear plurality inherently internal to Scripture, one can conclude that this plurality is entirely non-trivial for it precludes immediate or self-authenticating readings.

## Ricœur's Phenomenology and Tradition-Conscious Reasoning

Thus, Ricœur's phenomenology of interpretation provides the conceptual apparatus necessary for understanding the epistemic conditions of Scripture. Central to Ricœur's is his aforementioned distanciation, whereby a text, once inscribed, is removed from the immediate planes of its origin or author and becomes available for interpretation only through the careful mediation of historical consciousness, or, *tradition-conscious reasoning*. The interpreter is thus summoned into a dialogical process that is never complete, never self-fulfilling, and inherently accountable to prior interpretive communities. In *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur emphasises that the act of understanding a text involves a dialectic between explanation (*explication*) and understanding (*compréhension*), a process that acknowledges both the autonomy of the text through understanding, and the situatedness of the interpreter through understanding. For Scripture, this entails a recognition that the Bible's meaning is neither fully present upon the interpreter's first impression nor is it reducible to a simple propositional content; the interpreter must engage with the layers of "literary form" within the Bible: historical context, canonical placement, theological reception, and so forth. So, Ricœur only further demonstrates as to why Christian knowledge ought not to be unilateral, for the interpretive "surplus" that emerges from a distanciation of the Bible guarantees that Scripture continually exceeds any finite act of comprehension or private cognition. Moreover, the insistence of Ricœur on the ethical aspect of interpretation—wherein the text forces the interpreter into responsibility before a world it projects—is intimately connected with the Christian hermeneutical idea that engagement with Scripture entails accountability to both the community of faith and the historical tradition. Without such a structured hermeneutic, any claim to "understand" Scripture risks collapsing into an act of appropriation or projection, disunited from its formative conditions.<sup>1</sup>

## Epistemic Humility in Scripture and Canon

Historical and canonical precedent reinforces this necessity as well. Canon law repeatedly situates the exercise of theological judgment within structures designed to mediate private cognition and interpretation. For instance, per canons 749 §1 and 838–846, the bishop's office is entrusted with both teaching and guarding the deposit of faith; thus, doctrinal knowledge, or knowledge of God, cannot be privately apprehended in isolation from the ecclesial body. The magisterial authority ensures that any given claim on Scripture are accountable to communal reception and historical continuity, so any interpreter can be provided a formalised structure for the tradition-conscious reasoning demanded by the Bible. Similarly, canons 212 §3 and 218 §1 *explicitly* require that the faithful adhere to the guidance of pastors in doctrine and liturgy, demonstrating that private cognition is subordinated to the Church's ultimate custodianship of revelation. The obvious historical affinity of synodal review only further demonstrates the Church's recognition of the dangers inherent in unmediated interpretation beyond schismatic concern—even before the of the 1917 or 1983 Codes, councils routinely adjudicated disputes over orthodoxy to safeguard the communal conditions under which Christian knowledge is possible. The jurisprudential principle of *in dubiis, tutior via elegendam est* makes this caution extremely clear to any believer or interpreter: in cases of doubt concerning doctrine, the safer path—that is, the one respecting both the community of Christians and the Holy tradition—is to be followed.

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<sup>1</sup> See Newman 1990; Congar 1962; Ricœur 1981; Lonergan 1972 for discussions on tradition-conscious reasoning.

One ought not to simply form assumptions, as sedevacantists do, about the entire ecclesiastical authority of the Catholic Church on the basis of privately conceived propositions that ignore the hermeneutics of the Bible.

And of course, in making all these claims about Scripture and its nature within-itself presupposing this intellectual humility, Scriptural evidence must be provided to demonstrate that it, likewise, establishes that knowledge of God is provisional and mediated (as well as accountable). For instance, we can look to the Deuteronomic assertion that “the secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever”<sup>2</sup> in its enjoinder of the believer to discern between the accessible and the inaccessible, showing one how comprehension is always situationally partial and placed within a successive continuity. In 1 Corinthians 13:12 we have the fragmentary character of human knowledge: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.” Knowledge of God, even when mediated by the divine, is always anticipatory rather than possessive. The depiction of the risen Christ interpreting the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus<sup>3</sup> demonstrates how understanding can arise through dialogical exposition as opposed to instant private apprehension. There are innumerable examples that speak to the necessity of intellectual humility. For instance:

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”<sup>4</sup>

“All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, 'I am wise,' but it was beyond me. Whatever is, is beyond me.”<sup>5</sup>

“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”<sup>6</sup>

In the Catechism, there is the description of Scripture as “the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit” in CCC 85-86; CCC 109-110 speaks that faith and knowledge of God are formed within the Tradition and Community. Patristic theologians affirm tradition-conscious reasoning: Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.6.8 insists that interpreters recognise the limits of human intellects and subsequently rely on the Church’s guidance; Aquinas, in *Summa Theologiae* I, q.1, a.1, divine truth requires participation in divine illumination; Chrysostom, in his Homily on Matthew 25:1, the nature of exegesis is warned against solitary and unmediated readings, and so forth. There was an entire Reformation that occurred as a result of this reliance on intellectual humility within the Church’s loci (alongside, of course, corruption, nepotism...).

So, it can, very much so, be comfortably said that tradition-conscious reasoning is to be expected of every Christian, and it is most especially demanded by those who are Catholics. When, therefore, did the sedevacantists depart from this standard?

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 29:29 (NRSVUE).

<sup>3</sup> Luke 24:27 (NRSVUE).

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 3:5-6 (NRSVUE);

<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:23-24 (NRSVUE);

<sup>6</sup> Acts 17:11 (NRSVUE).

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