

Scripture at Vatican II: An Analysis of *Dei Verbum*

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Since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, scholars have debated which conciliar document was the most foundational. Some point to the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), since it was the first document approved by the Council and went on to mark the daily life of Catholics by the dramatic liturgical reform it engendered.[1] Others prioritize the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) because of its explicit ecclesiology.[2] It is also possible to propose, as the Council's most foundational document, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), despite the fact that it was one of the last approved.[3] In this essay, I will discuss how this proposition remains true today and whether it is likely to into the future.

The Roots of *Dei Verbum*

None of the conciliar documents appeared from thin air. The decades before Vatican II were marked by intense discussions around complicated theological issues; these formed a backdrop for the drafting of the first documents (technically, *schemata*) to be considered at the Council itself. The Church had struggled throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with modern ideas, scientific developments, and secular influences and their impact on the faith. We need not recount the well-known stories of the anti-Modernist campaign or the crisis of Americanism, and the like. We do, however, need to take a quick glance at how Biblical Studies fared in this environment, because these influences, in fact, set the stage for the struggles that focused immediately on the first *schema*, which eventually become *Dei Verbum*.

For centuries, the Catholic Church and its faithful had basically treated the Bible at face value, interpreting all of its historical and spiritual claims as absolute. Since it was the “Word of God,” how could it be anything other than *literally* true? With the onset of modern scientific methods of studying Scripture, known as the historical critical method(s), scholars began to see cracks in the presumed historical veneer of the biblical books. At first, their attention was cast on the Old Testament, the Pentateuch in particular, where some questioned the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible. Quickly, however, the New Testament came into view, with questions arising particularly around the historical reliability of the Gospels.

The Catholic Church's immediate response to these developments was to reject them. To this end, in 1893, Pope Leo XIII issued a cautionary encyclical, *Providentissimus Deus*, which directly addressed methodological developments in the study of Sacred Scripture. What is most remarkable about this encyclical, as we read it today, is its fairly balanced approach to new developments in Scripture studies given the predominance of literal habits of reading sacred texts. While Pope Leo cautioned Catholic exegetes to embark on new research from the perspective of faith and from within the Church's doctrinal framework, he also encouraged them to make good use of the modern methods of Scripture study, availing themselves of linguistic, archaeological, and scientific tools, in order that the meaning of biblical texts might be amplified for the faithful. In the late nineteenth century, this document read like a breath of fresh air. It represented the opening of a window for Catholic biblical scholars and lifted the cloud of working under the threat of ecclesiastical censure, which prevented scholars from investigating anything that might conflict with the established opinions of the Holy See.

This openness, however, was short-lived. From 1905 to 1915, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which Pope Leo XIII had created in 1902 (in part to monitor and guide these new developments in Biblical Studies), issued fourteen *responsa* condemning particular propositions gaining ground at the time. Among the condemnations, scholars were asked to abandon the notion that Moses himself was not the sole author of the first five books of the Bible. Moreover, numerous Catholic exegetes came under suspicion and were even silenced for advancing “novel ideas.” The winds had shifted and the momentum that had been gained under Pope Leo seemed forever lost.

Yet another milestone in Biblical Studies occurred in 1943 with the fiftieth anniversary of *Providentissimus Deus*. Pope Pius XII, whose disposition toward modern developments in the scholarly study of the Bible was generally open, issued his own encyclical on Scripture, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Pius XII not only praised Leo’s earlier encyclical, but went even further, virtually giving Catholic scholars permission to use every available means of investigating the Bible and its background, confident that the truth of Sacred Scripture would not be lost in the process, but that its meaning could be better understood. While the encyclical still cautioned scholars to conduct research from a faith-based perspective, the encouragement it gave to biblical scholars in supporting their professional work was a very significant step forward.

The recurring tension between novelty and caution in the early twentieth century is important to note, because it essentially constituted the situation in Biblical Studies just before Vatican II. Despite Pius XII’s Encyclical, some notable Catholic exegetes, such as Stanislas Lyonnet and Max Zerwick, were delated and censured by the Holy See on the eve of the Council for proliferating dangerous doctrines.[4]

The First Schema, the Controversies, and the Long Process

The mixed attitude toward the scholarly study of Scripture described above helped to set the stage for a battle that was to erupt as soon as the first draft of a constitution on divine revelation was proposed to the Council fathers. Because the Holy Office had directed the drafting of the documents, there was already suspicion among some of the Council fathers about the contents of some *schemata*. [5] So when the first *schema* on revelation, *De fontibus revelationis*, was proposed, controversy erupted. One after another, numerous significant Council fathers stood up to oppose the document, calling for it to be withdrawn and entirely rewritten. The problem was that neither those opposed to the *schema*, nor those in favor of it, had the necessary two-thirds vote required to resolve the issue.

For some days, the Council seemed stymied, with its future in jeopardy. Then, after some negotiation, Pope John

XIII himself intervened, a move he had tried to avoid lest he should be seen as interfering with the deliberations of the Council fathers. His instructions were that the *schema* was to be withdrawn and entirely reworked. With a stroke of genius, he established a “mixed commission” headed by two of the most polar opposites in the Roman Curia, Alfredo Ottaviani, head of the Holy Office, and an influential drafter of the first *schemata* of the Council, and Augustin Bea, head of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, and a biblical scholar.

No one could foresee that this commission would work throughout the next four sessions of the Council to arrive finally at an acceptable proposal for a Dogmatic Constitution. It underwent numerous drafts, thousands of amendments, and involved several heated debates over controverted issues, such as the nature and truth of the Scriptures, the historicity of the Gospels, and the complex relationship between Scripture, tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church on faith and morals. By then, a new Pope had been elected, Paul VI, who was leading the Church and carefully shepherding the Council to its conclusion. Unlike his predecessor, Paul VI had no qualms about intervening in Council deliberations, keeping close tabs on the debates and sending to the Council fathers written instructions, through intermediaries, sometimes ambiguous as to intent and authority.

The entire process was extremely long and complicated and need not be rehearsed here.[6] All told, the constitution existed in five different *schemata* during the council, not counting the two earlier forms that Ottaviani’s commission had produced prior to the first *schema*, which was given to the Council fathers during the first session, in November, 1962. What must also be acknowledged in this narrative is that various theologians worked behind the scenes, often as *periti* or expert advisors, to affect the final outcome. Even the Pontifical Biblical Commission influenced the last draft, when they issued their instruction, “On the Historical Truth of the Gospels” (*Sancta Mater Ecclesia*) on April 21, 1964. The heart of this document’s teaching appears in paragraph 19 of *Dei Verbum*. On the issue of the historical reliability of the Gospels, which the Constitution affirms several times in the same paragraph, it also states explicitly that the Gospels exhibit at least three distinct but overlapping layers of tradition: (1) the historical Jesus; (2) the oral preaching of the apostles; and (3) and the collecting, writing and editing process done by the evangelists. Implicit in this scenario is that the Gospels are not necessarily ‘literally’ true in every detail, as the process allowed for accretions and alterations over time. This teaching now appears in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#126).

Finally, on November 18, 1965, only weeks before the Council closed on December 8, the Council fathers overwhelmingly approved *Dei Verbum* with a favorable vote of 2,344 out

of 2,350. Despite the length of the process, and to a large degree, the concessions which were made to get there, the Dogmatic Constitution ranks as one of the greatest achievements of the Council. Our task from this point is to explain why this is so.

The Content of *Dei Verbum*

To begin, we need an overview of *Dei Verbum* and a summary of its contents. The outline is straightforward. Paragraph numbers are in parentheses.

Prologue (1)

Chapter 1: Divine Revelation Itself (2-6)

Chapter 2: Transmission of Divine Revelation (7-10)

Chapter 3: Sacred Scripture: Its Divine Inspiration and Interpretation (11-13)

Chapter 4: The Old Testament (14-16)

Chapter 5: The New Testament (17-20)

Chapter 6: Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church (21-26)

Despite its relative brevity (26 paragraphs or roughly 3,000 words in Latin), there can be no doubt regarding its significance as a teaching document. It does not merely address Sacred Scripture. It addresses the concept of divine revelation itself, in which the Scriptures play a crucial role.

The outline itself indicates the prominence given to the concept of divine revelation. The Prologue notably sets the tone for the whole document, addressing the mystery of divine communication by citing a passage from the First Letter of John (1 Jn 1:2-3). It also affirms that the Constitution falls within the tradition of prior magisterial teachings on this theme, namely those of the Council of Trent (1546) and Vatican Council I (1870). *Dei Verbum*'s teachings were to be seen as continuous with the Church's prior teaching on the theme of revelation.

Following the Prologue, the Constitution moves logically from the broad concept of divine revelation, through its transmission, to Sacred Scripture in its essentials, especially the key questions of inspiration and interpretation. Only then does it focus on the Old Testament and New Testament, respectively. Finally, it addresses an important pastoral question about the use of Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church. Thus, the Constitution flows from the broadest and most abstract teaching on the Bible to the Bible's concrete role and importance in the life of the Church.

To offer an overview of the Constitution's main teachings, I will summarize briefly each chapter, beginning with the Prologue.

Despite its brevity, the Prologue is critical to *Dei Verbum*. The opening words give it its title in Latin, meaning "Word of God," from the first phrase, "Hearing the Word of God reverently and proclaiming it confidently...." This expression places emphasis on the reception of God's communication. The Church first hears the Word of God in order to be able to proclaim it. What follows is a beautiful quotation from the First Letter of John, which emphasizes the personal nature of revelation as God's reaching out to humanity. Finally, the Prologue concludes with a mention of the three theological virtues, expressing the desire that faith grow into hope and then into love.

In the first chapter, the authors take up the question of the nature of revelation. Using a host of biblical citations, this chapter demonstrates God's desire to communicate with human beings, revealing the mystery of the divine will. It basically offers a terse summary of salvation history, jumping from Abraham to Moses to Jesus Christ. This revelatory process shows how the invisible God reached out in friendship to human beings through his "deeds and words," showing his love for humanity, which finds its ultimate expression in Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the "good news" (gospel). A striking feature of this presentation is its perspective on the Trinity, where the roles of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are carefully balanced, even if the Christological and pneumatological emphases are its focus. The chapter also emphasizes the truth of this revelation and the fact that it is accomplished in such a way that human beings can comprehend it. Mystery it may be, but it is knowable.

Progressing logically, Chapter Two discusses the transmission of God's revelation. Here, the Christological and pneumatological aspects of divine revelation come into sharper focus, this time with reference to the role of Christ and the Spirit in communicating divine revelation and preserving its authenticity. The truth of revelation, according to the text, is rooted in Christ's very person and in his own proclamation of the gospel; but in having commissioned the apostles to carry it forward through their own oral proclamation, the truth of the gospel also lies in the apostolic tradition. The Holy Spirit guided this "apostolic preaching," which the Church kept alive and eventually included in the canon of Sacred Scriptures.

At this point, the chapter makes an extremely important assertion with two phrases: "both Scripture and tradition must be accepted and honored with equal devotion and reverence"; and "Tradition and Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the word of God [...]." These statements demonstrate a clear Catholic principle, distinct from the teaching of other Christian denominations. Scripture and tradition constitute one unified means of revelation. They are not two separate sources. The text goes on to complicate matters some-

what by adding the term “Magisterium,” as if it were somehow a separate reality from tradition, which is never fully defined in the text. What is clear is that the Holy Spirit guarantees the Church’s authoritative interpretation of both Scripture and tradition, for it is the same Spirit who acts in both.

The third chapter narrows its focus to the Sacred Scriptures themselves, addressing their inspiration and interpretation. Nowhere does *Dei Verbum* adopt a single theory of inspiration. Rather, the Constitution asserts the inspiration of the Scriptures through the Holy Spirit, who guided the human authors of the Bible to ensure that their writings would express the proper divine message. What we should not miss here is that God and the human writers both are affirmed as true “authors” of the Scriptures. The Constitution also notes the importance of genres, the different types of literature found in the Bible, and it affirms the utility of the Scriptures as a reliable source for teaching and moral instruction, using a quotation from Second Timothy (2 Tim 3:16-17).

After a general exposition of Scripture, the text moves in the next two chapters, respectively, to the Old Testament and New Testament. It affirms the importance of both, while clearly noting the priority of the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old and the goal of all revelation because of its focus on Jesus Christ. Of utmost importance is the affirmation of the truth of all the Scriptures with regard to the divine message pertaining to salvation. The Constitution also adopts the three-fold process of the formation of the Gospels that the Pontifical Biblical Commission had taught in its 1964 document, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, referenced above. The three levels – the time of the historical Jesus, the oral preaching of the earliest apostles, and the time of the evangelists – allow for an acknowledged complex process of collecting, writing and editing the traditions about Jesus, all of which are evident in the canonical Gospels. Implicit in this framework is the possibility of accretions and even some distortions in these traditions, but the ‘truth’ of the Scriptures pertaining to salvation is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit.

The final chapter elucidates many aspects of the use of Scripture in the pastoral life of the Church. Unsurprisingly, the text strongly affirms the role of the bishops, as successors to the apostles, to proclaim the good news of revelation faithfully through their preaching, assisted by priests and others charged with preaching and teaching in the Church. The explicit ecumenical nature of the Council also comes to the fore in this chapter. While giving time-honored priority to the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible, it also calls for new ecumenical translations ‘from the original texts,’ which would help promote easy access to the widest number of Christians possible. As for professional exegetes, *Dei Verbum* encourages them in their study of the sacred writ, but also reminds them to do their

task “in accordance with the mind of the Church.” This advice is consistent with the prior teaching of Leo XIII and Pius XII in their respective encyclicals on the Scriptures.

Dei Verbum concludes with explicitly scriptural images taken from several biblical passages, consistent with the way it began. The conclusion expresses the desire that the Word of God, what it calls the “treasure of revelation,” which “stands forever,” be extended as far and as widely as possible, that it may ultimately triumph in the world. It concludes with the hope that devotion to the Word will bring about great spiritual renewal in the Church and beyond.

Evaluating *Dei Verbum*

Fifty years, relative to the Church’s actual age, is not an exceptionally long period of time. Given that the average occurrence of a Church Council is only once every one-hundred years or so (with Ecumenical Councils, such as Vatican II, being even rarer), we are perhaps, after only half-a-century, not in the best position yet to offer a definitive evaluation of the impact of *Dei Verbum*. Despite our proximity to the event of Vatican II, I think it is still possible to make some important observations on the basis of our experience so far. Seven factors strike me as significant and even suggest that *Dei Verbum* was the Second Vatican Council’s most important achievement.

The first factor is the designation of *Dei Verbum* as a “Dogmatic Constitution” resulting from an Ecumenical Council. As per the hierarchy of ecclesiastical texts, the Dogmatic Constitution is the weightiest in terms of authority. Of the many texts produced at Vatican II, merely four were ranked as Constitutions, and of these only one other was ranked particularly as a “Dogmatic Constitution” (i.e., *Lumen Gentium*). As was pointed out in 1985, when the Synod of Bishops convened to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Council’s closing, the four conciliar constitutions provide the “interpretive key” to all the other documents of the Council.[7] In the same passage, it emphasizes that one should not press the distinction between the *pastoral* and *dogmatic* nature of the Council, as if they were separate and opposing categories. While it is true that Vatican II proclaimed no new dogmas, it nonetheless refined and updated the Church’s understanding of major dogmatic teachings, such as revelation.

A second factor concerns the topic of revelation. *Dei Verbum* marks the first time in the Church’s history that the topic of divine revelation was formally investigated on its own. While Trent and Vatican I both promulgated teachings related to this theme, neither addresses it in the formal way that Vatican II does. The theme of divine revelation is such an all-encompassing, fundamental concept, which touches so many

other areas of theology, that it is truly a noteworthy contribution of the Council.

The third point reinforces the previous one. The Council's own Doctrinal Commission made the judgment that, despite its later adoption, *Dei Verbum* should be considered "in a way the first of all the constitutions of this Council, so that its Preface introduces them all to a certain extent."^[8] This is a remarkable affirmation. When one considers that the Preface of the Constitution expresses the basic nature of revelation as divine outreach to humanity, which is nevertheless seen in many different ways (e.g., creation, the Sacred Scriptures, the sacraments, etc.), one can see the far-reaching implications the Constitution has on so many other facets of the Council's teaching. It is for this reason that I think the Commission's judgment should not be casually dismissed as hyperbole; it is rather an authentic statement by the Church regarding the significance of *Dei Verbum*.

The fourth reason to view *Dei Verbum* as the Council's most important achievement concerns its implications for the treatment of Sacred Scripture itself. It obviously accords rightful significance to the Bible as the special locus of divine communication or divine revelation. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are assured that the Bible communicates the Word of God and all that is necessary for salvation. Think for a moment of just how important Biblical Studies were for the success of the Council. Scholars today often rightly point to the influence of significant theologians working behind-the-scenes, especially those belonging to the European movement known as *nouvelle théologie* (e.g., Yves Congar, Karl Rahner, Jean Danielou, Henri de Lubac, Gérard Philips, etc.) What methods did these theologians use for their work? Two influences loom large in their orientation, namely use of the Bible and of the Early Church Fathers as main resources.^[9] In going 'back to the sources' (*ressourcement*), they began to reformulate aspects of theology that would leave their mark on virtually all the documents of Vatican II. Paradoxically, by stepping back into time in order to retrieve the sources, these theologians actually helped the Church move forward. The fact that biblical scholars had been quietly plodding along since the mid-nineteenth century (at least) proved to be crucial in terms of preparing the ground for the Council. In some ways, one could consider *Dei Verbum* itself a 'fruit' of an enlightened stream of biblical exegesis since *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Aflante Spiritu*, discussed above. This biblical perspective impacted *all* the Council's documents. Scripture became one of the major 'lenses' through which the Church's teaching would be studied, refined, and nuanced. *Dei Verbum* was somewhat the culmination of this long process, but its new beginning also pointed to the future. This singular importance of a profound

biblical perspective found in *Dei Verbum* highlights its longstanding impact.

A fifth reason to consider in evaluating the critical importance of *Dei Verbum* is the careful balance it struck between continuity and novelty. While it is true that Pope Benedict XVI, in particular, insisted on viewing Vatican II in terms of its continuity with all prior Church teachings, one cannot reasonably deny certain novelties in *Dei Verbum*. (I have specifically avoided the word 'rupture' in this context, substituting it with novelties, for reasons I will later explain.) The novelties, as well as the continuities, of *Dei Verbum* need to be appreciated. On the side of continuity, I point to the following, to name just a few:

- ◆ continuous reference to teachings from Trent and Vatican Council I, among other Councils, concerning the canon, inspiration, and truth of the Scriptures;
- ◆ multiple references to biblical texts and Fathers of the Church, especially notables like Jerome, Augustine, Irenaeus, and John Chrysostom;
- ◆ affirmation that the Sacred Scriptures were inspired by the Holy Spirit, with God as their author;
- ◆ reiteration of the concept of revelation as God's mysterious but direct self-communication to human beings, of which Jesus Christ is both the goal and foremost expression;
- ◆ affirmation that both the Old and New Testaments are fully God's Word, and that the Old Testament is hidden in the New, while the New Testament fulfills and makes fully understood the Old;
- ◆ encouragement to use the Bible as a reliable and divinely-inspired guide for teaching, moral instruction, prayer, and the spiritual growth;
- ◆ mention of the time-honored place of the Vulgate in Catholic scriptural reading;
- ◆ preservation of the role of the Magisterium of the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to guarantee the faithful interpretation of the Bible.

Many more could be added to this list to show how *Dei Verbum* was in line with earlier Church teaching. And yet, some novel aspects introduced by *Dei Verbum* should not be overlooked. A short list would include the following:

- ◆ extensive treatment of the mystery of revelation in personalistic terms, employing the language of friendship, and parental imagery (as in a mother speaking to her children), with a concomitant avoidance of propositional language;

- ◆ explanation of the complex interrelationship between Sacred Scripture and tradition as one unified source of divine revelation;
- ◆ analogical use of the Incarnation to explain the Bible as equally the Word of God and the product of real human authors;
- ◆ explicit adoption of the teaching of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's identification of three layers of tradition within the canonical Gospels (*Sancta Mater Ecclesia*), thus acknowledging a more complex process for their birth;
- ◆ the call for complete and easy access to the Bible in order that all the faithful might read it;
- ◆ the presence of an ecumenical orientation in the Constitution, consistent with the other conciliar documents, but especially in the call for ecumenical translations of the Bible;
- ◆ the refusal to invoke the word "inerrancy" to defend the basic truth of Scripture, instead asserting "that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and *without error*, teach that truth which God, *for the sake of our salvation*, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures" (*Dei Verbum*, 11, emphases added);
- ◆ the lack of any anathemas, despite evident tensions in the decades prior to the Council between Catholic exegetes and Roman Curial officials over the proper interpretation of Scripture.

Some might quibble with one or another of the points or categories I have identified as novel, but this list illustrates sufficiently that there are aspects in *Dei Verbum* which make it stand out from the past. The distinguished Church historian John O'Malley has rightly emphasized that the shift in language in many documents at Vatican II should be seen neither as accidental nor insignificant.[10] *Dei Verbum*, which was the result of many battles fought over the use of theological language, represents part of this shift.

A sixth aspect of *Dei Verbum*'s preeminence comes to mind. Although it has long been considered a neglected document, in fact, along with the dogmatic Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,[11] I suggest it had the most immediate and direct impact on Catholic life after the Council. The reason is simple. Nothing more directly touched the lives of Catholics in the pew than the dramatic changes in liturgy that took place quickly after the Council. Indeed, some thought the changes too rapid, with inadequate preparation. As if overnight, the Mass changed. It was in the vernacular rather than Latin. The readings at Mass were no longer a repetitive list of familiar passages but a much broader selection from both Old and New Testaments thanks to the introduction of a three-year cycle

Lectionary for Sundays and a two-year cycle Lectionary for weekday Masses. *Dei Verbum* played a significant role in this change because it had called for greater access to the Bible and for more prominence to be given to the Bible in Catholic life.

Liturgy was not the only sphere of influence, however. In the wake of *Dei Verbum*, Catholic Bible Study programs (e.g., Little Rock Bible Study), biblical institutes (e.g., Georgetown), and conferences (e.g., Misericordia) sprang up almost overnight. In a very short space of time, indeed, there emerged an immeasurable quantity of Catholic scholarly writing on the Bible. Three notable Catholic scholars, Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, Roland Murphy, edited and published an authoritative one-volume commentary on the Bible in 1968, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, only three years after *Dei Verbum* and the end of the Council.[12] All the contributors to this publication were Catholic scholars, exhibiting how quickly Catholic biblical scholarship began to flourish once the Council had set the direction, bringing it on par with Protestant biblical scholarship.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the important strides made in regards to the Catholic approach to Sacred Scripture is the speed at which they took place. The encouragement received from the Council through *Dei Verbum* cannot be underestimated on this account. Should anyone take exception to some one or another of the six points establishing the basis of *Dei Verbum* as the Council's greatest achievement, I suggest there is yet a seventh compelling reason. I refer to what might be deemed the official 'fruits' of *Dei Verbum*. They deserve their own special consideration.

The Fruits of *Dei Verbum*

Dei Verbum has been especially productive since the end of the Council, not only promoting Catholic Bible studies and more familiarity of Scripture among Catholics, but in fostering three more official "fruits."

The first is found in a series of post-conciliar teachings of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. Although Pope Paul VI had reduced the teaching authority of the PBC in his reform of the Curia in 1971, it nevertheless remained a resource for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which has continued to produce helpful documents concerning the Catholic understanding of Scripture, including the following:

- ◆ On Sacred Scripture and Christology (1984);
- ◆ Unity and Diversity in the Church (1988);
- ◆ The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993);
- ◆ The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible (2001);

- ◆ The Bible and Morality, Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct (2008);
- ◆ The Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture (2014).

Granted, not all these documents are equally useful or well known. Some are not even easily accessible, as there is not always an English translation available! [13] Yet the list shows the incredible richness and diversity of themes being addressed. To those who would claim that these teachings no longer have any authority, because of the new status of the PBC, I would note that they are published under the authority of the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with explicit approbation of the pope. They do not have the status, of course, of a Dogmatic Constitution. They cannot simply be ignored, however, as inconsequential.

Of this list, the most important teachings are likely the 1993, 2001 and 2014 documents. Each of these addresses challenging questions that arose from the discussions of *Dei Verbum*, touching the important questions of exegetical method, the status of the Old Testament for Christians, and the inspiration and truth of Sacred Scripture. All these appear in *Dei Verbum*, but with incomplete treatments. The PBC, then, continues the long tradition of Catholic teaching on the Bible, seeking ways to help people comprehend aspects of the Scriptures that are not always easily understood.

A second fruit lies in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and its teaching on Scripture. [14] The Catechism's direct use of *Dei Verbum* (some seventy-five references) is evidence enough of this Constitution's legacy. The Catechism offers only a schematic summary of Catholic teaching on the Bible, but its deferral to *Dei Verbum* indicates trust in this Constitution's ability to supply the more generous presentation needed. Within the context of the Catechism's presentation on Scripture, three key principles of Catholic biblical interpretation stand out: [15]

- 1) Pay attention to the content and unity of all the Sacred Scriptures.
- 2) Read and interpret the Bible within the living tradition of the Church.
- 3) Keep in mind the coherence of all the truths of revelation.

The context for this teaching is given in paragraph twelve of *Dei Verbum*. There we read the Church's encouragement to interpret the Bible, mindful of the diverse literary genres it contains, but also to do so within an ecclesial context. Catholic exegetes perform their services in the context of the Church and its living tradition, not simply as independent contractors. These principles are intended to lead to authentic interpretations that cohere with the Church's teaching, yet exegetes are

left free to apply modern methods of interpretation to the best of their ability.

The Catechism quotes another noteworthy teaching of *Dei Verbum*, namely, concerning the three levels of tradition found in the Gospels. [16] This citation shows the influence of *Dei Verbum* once more on a sensitive topic: the historical veracity of the Gospels. One could multiply the citations from *Dei Verbum* in the Catechism, but the main point is clear. *Dei Verbum* totally orients its teaching on Sacred Scripture. Yet there is one place where certain limitations in the Catechism become evident. When it comes to citing the Bible, the Catechism tends to revert to an earlier style of biblical proof texting or simple assumption of the historicity of details in the biblical texts. Perhaps this is unavoidable in the catechism genre, where the purpose is to show the biblical roots of Catholic doctrine. But it does point to an ongoing limitation of the practice of biblical exegesis in Catholic teachings, even if the theoretical principles are clearly enunciated.

The third fruit is found in *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI's post-synodal apostolic exhortation on Sacred Scripture. [17] This is likely the most important and authoritative Catholic teaching on the Bible since *Dei Verbum*. *Verbum Domini* resulted directly from the Synod of Bishops in 2008 on the Word of God. As such, it is a much longer text that addresses a wide range of pertinent aspects of a Catholic approach to the Bible (124 numbered paragraphs). We cannot do justice to this exhortation here, but a few worthy observations should point to its significance.

Note first that the title alludes to a liturgical act. *Verbum Domini*, as well as its English equivalent, "The Word of the Lord," is the proclamation after a reading at Mass, to which the congregation responds, "Deo Gratias," or "Thanks be to God." This liturgical allusion is telling. It points to the privileged place the Scriptures hold in Catholic liturgy. In fact, this is where most Catholics encounter the Word of God, which makes the quality of our liturgical proclamation of the Word of God all that more important (e.g., reading, preaching).

Note also the context of this exhortation. Pope Benedict explicitly mentioned the nearly century-long tradition of Catholic teaching on the Bible, extending from Pope Leo XIII, through Pius XII, and down to *Dei Verbum* itself. He places his own exhortation in this context, which strengthens one of the key points he made about interpretations of the Second Vatican Council: the presence of continuity in the Church's teachings. Significantly, the exhortation quotes or explicitly draws attention to *Dei Verbum* some forty times, but occasionally the quotes are used in a different context, which takes some of the novel edge off the Dogmatic Constitution's original text. Nevertheless, Pope Benedict, who was a *peritus* at the

Council and who had helped shape *Dei Verbum*, interprets his own exhortation under its influence.

The exhortation's content is broad and diverse, but one controversial point is worth emphasizing. Some scholars see this document as a step backwards in terms of Catholic exegesis. The primary reason is that it asserts serious limitations to the historical critical method, and clearly favors theological and spiritual exegesis in a way that flourished in the patristic period. Pope Benedict made no secret of his preferences in this regard. So this critique is true, but it overlooks one important fact. Nowhere does the exhortation condemn either modern exegesis, in general, or historical critical method, in particular. Moreover, the exhortation favorably quotes the 1993 teaching of the PBC's document on biblical interpretation, which calls the historical critical method "indispensable" as a starting point for exegesis (*Verbum Domini*, 32). Some might call this disingenuous and not really intended, but to overlook it is to deny its import. Especially when one sees this exhortation in the extended context from Leo XIII through Vatican II, we have to accept the teaching of *Verbum Domini* at face value, even if it does not promote modern Biblical Studies in exactly the same way as earlier documents. I think Benedict's desire, rather, was to seek a balance between excessively technical (and sometimes historically-skeptical) exegesis and that which remains open to the deep spiritual message of Sacred Scripture. This is not an unrealistic expectation. *Dei Verbum* itself called for Catholics to use the Scriptures to greater effect in their lives, and drew attention to its utility for moral and spiritual guidance.

The fruits of *Dei Verbum*, then, are impressive. Cumulatively, I believe these seven points demonstrate that *Dei Verbum*, despite its somewhat neglected status, can be seen as one of the Council's most important and successful teachings. No doubt the other constitutions of Vatican II have made their impact felt in the last fifty years, as well; but in terms of far-reaching ramifications, *Dei Verbum* still stands out among the pack. As the 1985 Synod insisted, all four constitutions provide the interpretive 'key' to the Council. I do not, however, think it an exaggeration to say that *Dei Verbum* leads the way.

***Dei Verbum* and the Way Forward**

At this point, one might pose the question about how *Dei Verbum* can, or will, impact the future teaching of the Catholic Church on biblical matters. No one has a crystal ball, and if there were to be another Ecumenical Council in our lifetime, it is difficult to intuit what progress might be made on any number of questions. Nonetheless, I think we can point to a few ways in which *Dei Verbum* might serve as a helpful "lamp unto our feet" (Ps 119:105).

First, we should recall that this Dogmatic Constitution was forged on the basis of compromise. Various factions contributed to its formulation over an extended period of time, and inevitably, when the time came for clear statements, a give-and-take process took over which left no one fully pleased. That is why interpreters of the Constitution can sometimes cite a passage to support one side of an argument while another group can cite the same passage to the opposite effect. An example is the expression "without error." Lifted from its context, and not knowing that the Council fathers fought seriously over avoiding the term "inerrancy," which was too tied to biblical fundamentalism, it is easy to invoke this passage to claim that the Bible is inerrant historically, as well as in matters of faith. This is not *Dei Verbum*'s teaching, and later Church teachings, such as from the PBC or papal exhortations and encyclicals, can be helpful in moving forward. As important as *Dei Verbum* is, it is not the last word on the topic of revelation. Moreover, even though the final text of the Constitution is the only authoritative one, understanding the many difficult discussions that occurred to arrive at the final text is most instructive and helps to orient its proper interpretation.

A second aspect of this question is the open-ended nature of professional Biblical Studies. As the 1993 PBC teaching on Catholic biblical interpretation makes clear, there is no one definitive method which is Catholic. All methods have strengths and weaknesses. The only approach clearly incompatible with a Catholic approach is fundamentalism. *Dei Verbum* simply did not address these kinds of questions. It affirmed the need to use modern, scientific tools to explore the Scriptures, but it never delved into methods. Given the fact that a plethora of new modern methods of exegesis and interpretation have come to the fore since Vatican II, this is likely to remain an open field for a long time to come. *Dei Verbum* does not shut the door on such developments, but asks that Catholic exegetes do their work responsibly, within the context of the Church and under the faithful guidance of the Magisterium. As a biblical scholar, I do not find this expectation unreasonable or delimiting. It is simply a sound principle of Catholic exegesis.

Finally, there is the question of authoritative interpretations of Scripture. Some Catholics think naively that the Catholic Church regularly proclaims the authoritative interpretation of virtually any biblical passage. This is not the teaching of *Dei Verbum* either. Nor is this the practice of the Catholic Church on a regular basis. When the Constitution insists that the Magisterium retains the right and duty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret the Scriptures authoritatively, this applies in cases of doubt and when doctrinal issues are at stake. What is surprising is how few times in history the Church has exercised this right. There are few biblical interpretations defined doctrinally by the Church, and most of the handful of cases concern a decision on what a given passage

does not mean, rather than what it does (e.g., on the brothers and sisters of Jesus, Mark 3:32).

Clearly, then, *Dei Verbum* is a seminal text in our day for a Catholic appreciation of Scripture. But in what way(s) does it point us toward the future? I suggest at least five possibilities.

Five Paths for the Future

First, *Dei Verbum* is a text that incorporates both continuity and novelty in its orientation. Note that I prefer to avoid the term discontinuity, or even worse, rupture. Both terms are too harsh for what Vatican II represents, especially in its Constitution on divine revelation. Rather, there are novel aspects, as I have pointed out above, yet the text is clearly presented in line with previous Church teaching on the topic. Both continuity and novelty are essential, especially if we are truly to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit. *Dei Verbum* balances both aspects very well.

Second, the Constitution's assertion that the Magisterium serves the Word of God and is not its master orients us to the future, as well (*Dei Verbum*, 10). There is need of much more work on the relationship between Scripture, tradition and the Magisterium to flesh out this insight

Third, the Constitution's well known insistence on divine revelation as a *personal* invitation from God to enter into relationship will continue to guide our future understanding of the mystery of God's outreach to humanity. Sadly, many Catholics still do not have a full appreciation of this personal dimension. Moreover, the average Catholic's familiarity with the Word of God as a means to know Christ is seriously wanting. We can do much more in the future to act on this teaching of *Dei Verbum*.

Fourth, the complex relationship between the Old and New Testaments is a perennial challenge. Many Catholics still wonder about the value of the Old Testament in its own right, and some still naively view the God of the Old Testament as different from the revelation found in the New Testament. *Dei Verbum* addresses this question in basic ways, but only scratching the surface. The PBC's later teaching, however, has helped somewhat to deepen our understanding of this topic. [18]

Finally, in an era of evident 'cooling' of ecumenical fervor, this Constitution can help us rediscover the importance of this most novel of orientations. The very notion of allowing Scripture to become the "soul of theology" (*Dei Verbum*, 24) still has a long way to go, but in this process, we share with our Protestant sisters and brothers the same desire that the

Word might foster knowledge of Christ, the Word-made-flesh, and the salvation he brings.

These five are hardly the only possible directions the Church might take in the future, but I believe they are each firmly rooted in the unified vision of the Constitution and have the force to help push us toward the next level of comprehension of the mystery of divine revelation. No one can predict what the next fifty years will hold for theology and the Church's implementation of Vatican II, but I suspect when the centenary of *Dei Verbum* finally arrives, all will marvel once more at how profound, how prescient, and how significant this short document, which emerged from a long, circuitous, and difficult process in the early 1960s really was. As the Constitution itself concludes, citing Second Thessalonians, may the Word of God indeed "spread rapidly and be glorified" (*Dei Verbum*, 26). ■

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ENDNOTES

- [1] E.g., Massimo Faggioli, "Sacrosanctum Concilium and the Meaning of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 437-452.
- [2] Albert C. Outler, "A Response," in *The Documents of Vatican II* (ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J.; New York: America Press, 1966), 102.
- [3] See: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html (accessed Aug. 25, 2014, 6:00 AM).
- [4] Gerald P. Fogarty, *American Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A History from the Early Republic to Vatican II* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 331.
- [5] So, Karim Schelkens, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II: A Redaction History of the Schema De fontibus revelationis (1960-1962)* (Brill's Series in Church History 41; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010).
- [6] See Ronald D. Witherup, *Scripture, Dei Verbum* (Rediscovering Vatican II; New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 1-31; idem., *The Word of God at Vatican II: Exploring Dei Verbum* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014), 3-7; and Riccardo Burri-gana, *La Bibbia nel concilio: La redazione della costituzione "Dei Verbum" del Vaticano II* (Bologna: Società Editrice Il Mulino, 1998).
- [7] Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, 1985, Final Report, I.5.

[8] Cited in Ormond Rush, "Toward a Comprehensive Interpretation of the Council and Its Documents," *Theological Studies* 73:3 (2012): 568.

[9] See the essays in Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds. *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (New York: Oxford University, 2013).

[10] John W. O'Malley, S.J., *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University, 2010), 11-12, and idem., "Trent and Vatican II: Two Styles of Church," in *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations* (eds. Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella; New York: Oxford University, 2006), 301-320.

[11] See especially *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7 and 51; text available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html (accessed Oct. 6, 2014 2:25 PM).

[12] Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., eds. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood-Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

[13] See the texts on the Vatican website, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_doc_index.htm (accessed Aug. 25, 2014 11:00 AM).

[14] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), Part I, Chap. 2, Art. 3; #101-141.

[15] *Catechism*, #112-114; *Dei Verbum*, § 12.

[16] *Catechism*, #126; *Dei Verbum*, § 19.

[17] *Verbum Domini* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), also available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html (accessed Aug. 25, 2014, 12:00 PM).

[18] *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2001), also available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html (accessed Sept. 25, 2014 2:00 PM).

Among all the documents of Vatican II, Dei Verbum most closely resembles a traditional conciliar document in form, declaring and expounding doctrine. As a dogmatic constitution, it was subjected to greater theological and juridical scrutiny, especially as it dealt with a matter that is fundamental to the faith. Divine revelation, which is the word of God expressed in Scripture and Tradition, is the basis of all Christian doctrine. Dei Verbum reaffirms the Council of Trent's teaching that Scripture is not the only basis of revealed doctrine. Yet neither the Tridentine synod nor the modern Council have specified if the doctrinal content of Scripture and Tradition are coextensive. It could be that Scripture and Tradition cover the same doctrines, while helping to clarify each other. 2011. Revelation, scripture and tradition: Lessons from Vatican II's Constitution Dei Verbum for Contemporary Theology. (International Journal of Systematic Theology, 13, 4), 418. 21 ibid., 77-78. The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, for instance, says that Dei Verbum was not only written with an awareness of errors in the Bible, but that it taught that "Scriptural teaching is truth without error [only] to the extent that it conforms to the salvific purposes of God." It would seem, in other words, that it is not possible to firmly rely on. 6 SESSION 1 A Brief History of Dei Verbum THE WORD OF GOD AT VATICAN II: EXPLORING DEI VERBUM, PAGES 1 16 Day 1 1. Has your own familiarity with the Bible changed over the course of your lifetime? In what noticeable ways? 2. In your lifetime, how has the church's use of Scripture helped you to appreciate the gift of God's revelation? 8 8 Session 1 A Brief History of Dei Verbum Day Review the chart on pages of the commentary comparing the teachings about Scripture from the councils of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II. What stands out to you about Vatican II? 11. What scholarly advances did Pope Leo XIII begin to address in his 1893 encyclical Providentissimus Deus?