

The Word on Fire

VATICAN II
COLLECTION

The Constitutions

The Word on Fire
VATICAN II
COLLECTION

The Constitutions

Edited by
Matthew Levering

Foreword by
Bishop Robert Barron
with commentary by the postconciliar popes

Published by Word on Fire, Park Ridge, IL 60068
© 2021 by Word on Fire Catholic Ministries
Printed in the United States of America
All rights reserved

Commentary excerpts collected by Matthew Levering and Matthew Becklo

Design and layout by Rozann Lee, Cassie Pease, and Clare LoCoco.
Cover and interior art by Cory Mendenhall.

Conciliar texts and commentaries used with permission of Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
All rights reserved.

First published February 2021
Reprinted August 2023, December 2024
ISBN: 978-1-943243-93-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020924131

“[The Second Vatican Council] has invested its teachings with the authority of the supreme ordinary magisterium, which ordinary magisterium is so obviously authentic that it must be accepted with docility and sincerity by all the faithful, according to the mind of the Council as expressed in the nature and aims of the individual documents.”

— *Pope St. Paul VI*

“With the passing of the years, *the Council documents have lost nothing of their value or brilliance*. They need to be read correctly, to be widely known and taken to heart as important and normative texts of the Magisterium, within the Church’s Tradition. . . . I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council *as the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century*: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning.”

— *Pope St. John Paul II*

“The Second Vatican Council Documents, to which we must return, freeing them from a mass of publications which instead of making them known have often concealed them, are a compass in our time too that permits the Barque of the Church to put out into the deep in the midst of storms or on calm and peaceful waves, to sail safely and to reach her destination.”

— *Pope Benedict XVI*

“Vatican II was a Council on faith, inasmuch as it asked us to restore the primacy of God in Christ to the center of our lives, both as a Church and as individuals. The Church never takes faith for granted, but knows that this gift of God needs to be nourished and reinforced so that it can continue to guide her pilgrim way. The Second Vatican Council enabled the light of faith to illumine our human experience from within, accompanying the men and women of our time on their journey.”

— *Pope Francis*

Contents

Foreword

ix

Opening Address

1

I. DEI VERBUM

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

13

II. LUMEN GENTIUM

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church

43

III. SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

151

IV. GAUDIUM ET SPES

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

211

Closing Address

339

Afterword

347

Key Terms and Figures

357

Frequently Asked Questions

367



Foreword

Bishop Robert Barron

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), a gathering of Catholic bishops from around the world under the headship of Pope St. John XXIII and then Pope St. Paul VI, was one of the most significant cultural and ecclesiastical events of the twentieth century. Though practically everyone acknowledges its importance, Catholics have been debating its precise meaning and application for the past sixty years. As I write these words in the waning days of the year 2020, a fresh controversy has broken out, this time prompted by “traditionalists” who claim that Vatican II has betrayed authentic Catholicism and produced disastrous consequences in the life of the Church. In the years that I was coming of age, the 1970s and 1980s, the argument was, largely, between advocates of a “hermeneutic of continuity” reading versus a “hermeneutic of rupture” interpretation of the council—which is to say, between those who appreciated Vatican II as a legitimate development of the teaching that preceded it, and those who saw the council as a real break with that tradition and a signal that something altogether new was emerging in the life of the Church.

To understand this rather complex set of positions and counterpositions, it is advisable to look, however briefly, at the council and its immediate aftermath. The great and saintly pope who summoned this gathering of bishops saw the purpose of the council as fundamentally

missionary. The Church of the early 1960s did not face major doctrinal questions, but many priests, bishops, scholars, and pastoral practitioners did indeed think that the Church's regnant neo-scholastic theology, a rather dry, superficial version of the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, was inadequate to the missionary task in the modern world. Thus, what the overwhelming majority of the theological experts and bishops at Vatican II opted for was an updating of the Church, but paradoxically, precisely through a recovery of the more lyrical language of the early Church Fathers and of the Scriptures. This change, they felt, would facilitate the process of bringing the light of Christ to the men and women of our time. It is noteworthy that unlike almost all of the conciliar texts that came before, the documents of Vatican II are not pithy statements of belief or anathemas of heresies, but rather lengthy, meditative theological essays designed to persuade rather than to define or condemn. That this approach won the day at Vatican II is evident in the vote counts for the conciliar documents, almost all of which were passed with only a handful of negative votes out of over two thousand cast.

To be sure, there was a small group of vocal dissenters to the documents, bishops and theologians who preferred to stay within the confines of the standard neo-scholastic approach, but it is fair to say that they were clearly defeated at the council. Now, the victorious party, within five years of the close of Vatican II, split into two camps, one more liberal and the other more conservative. The former, represented by such figures as Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng, and Gregory Baum, saw the documents of Vatican II as a first step in the direction of a more radical reform of the Church. They argued that the council was much more than the written texts that it produced; that it had, in fact, unleashed a spirit that should be allowed to blow through the Church, affecting its doctrines, practices, and institutional structures. The latter group, represented by, among others, Joseph Ratzinger, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Karol Wojtyła, reacted against this liberal reading. In a famous essay from the early seventies, Ratzinger decried the desire to perpetuate an amorphous "spirit of the council." In point of fact, he argued, the Church always turns with a kind of relief from a council, since such gatherings always represent a certain throwing of the Church into suspense. While the theologians and bishops gather to deliberate and discuss, as indeed they must from time to time, the Church is not focused on its basic work of worshiping God, evangelizing, and caring for the poor.

Once the council has completed its task and resolved whatever difficulties needed resolving, the Church returns with renewed enthusiasm and clarity to its mission. Therefore, the perpetuation of the spirit of Vatican II would be tantamount, Ratzinger concluded, to condemning the Church to a permanent state of indecision.

These two camps, corresponding more or less to the hermeneutic of rupture and hermeneutic of continuity approaches referenced above, have battled for the past roughly fifty years, but the latter school came to the fore due to the fact that two of its most distinguished representatives, Wojtyła and Ratzinger, both were elected to the office of Peter. Their papacies, expressed in numerous homilies, talks, encyclicals, and formal statements, stabilized the interpretation of Vatican II. The radical traditionalists of the present moment represent an energetic comeback of the neo-scholastics who lost the day at Vatican II. They reject both the hermeneutic of continuity and the hermeneutic of rupture, preferring to see the entire Vatican II project as misbegotten from the beginning.

With the book you are reading, I am nailing my colors to the mast. I and Word on Fire stand firmly with Vatican II and hence against the radical traditionalists. And we stand firmly with the Wojtyła-Ratzinger interpretation of the council, and hence against the progressives. We are convinced that, even as many voices have argued about the council since the documents appeared in the mid-1960s, vanishingly few Catholics have actually *read* the texts themselves. This series is designed to address that problem. This first volume includes the four “constitutions” of the council—which is to say, the principal essays that most fully articulate its purpose and ethos. The three “declarations” and nine “decrees” of the council can be found in the second volume. But both volumes also feature a range of commentaries and explications of these marvelous documents, most drawn from the popes and bishops who provide a magisterial interpretation.

Many years ago, I heard a speaker remark that far too many people in the Church seem to want either Vatican I or Vatican III! That traditionalists and progressives still dominate much of the conversation today proves that his observation still has validity. I believe that the documents of Vatican II are still widely unread, and if they are read, often misunderstood. The needful thing, I am convinced, is a robust and enthusiastic reappropriation of the texts of Vatican II. I hope that this book represents a contribution to that project.



Opening Address to the Council

Pope St. John XXIII

Today, Venerable Brethren, is a day of joy for Mother Church: through God's most kindly providence the longed-for day has dawned for the solemn opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, here at St. Peter's shrine. And Mary, God's Virgin Mother, on this feast day of her noble motherhood, gives it her gracious protection.

THE CHURCH IN COUNCIL

A positive proof of the Catholic Church's vitality is furnished by every single council held in the long course of the centuries—by the twenty ecumenical councils as well as by the many thousands of memorable regional and provincial ones emblazoned on the scroll of history.

And now the Church must once more reaffirm that teaching authority of hers which never fails, but will endure until the end of time. For that was Our reason for calling this most authoritative assembly, and We address you now as the humble successor, the latest born, of this Prince of Apostles. The present Council is a special, worldwide manifestation by the Church of her teaching office, exercised in taking account of the errors, needs and opportunities of our day.

A History of Triumph . . .

We address you, therefore, as Christ's vicar, and We naturally begin this General Council by setting it in its historical context. The voice of the past is both spirited and heartening. We remember with joy those early popes and their more recent successors to whom we owe so much. Their hallowed, momentous words come down to us through the councils held in both the East and the West, from the fourth century to the Middle Ages, and right down to modern times. Their uninterrupted witness, so zealously given, proclaims the triumph of Christ's Church, that divine and human society which derives from its divine Redeemer its title, its gifts of grace, its whole dynamic force.

. . . And of Adversity

Here is cause indeed for spiritual joy. And yet this history has its darker side too, a fact, which cannot be glossed over. These nineteen hundred years have reaped their harvest of sorrow and bitterness. The aged Simeon's prophecy to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, proves true in every age: "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, and for a sign that shall be contradicted."¹ Jesus, too, when grown to manhood, made it quite clear that men in times to come would oppose Him. We remember those mysterious words of His: "He who hears you, hears me."² St. Luke, who records these words, also quotes Him later as saying: "He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters."³

To Be with Christ or Against Him

Certain it is that the critical issues, the thorny problems that wait upon men's solution, have remained the same for almost twenty centuries. And why? Because the whole of history and of life hinges on the person of Jesus Christ. *Either* men anchor themselves on Him and His Church, and thus enjoy the blessings of light and joy, right order and peace; *or* they live their lives apart from Him; many positively oppose Him, and deliberately exclude themselves from the Church. The result can only be confusion in their lives, bitterness in their relations with one another, and the savage threat of war.

A Pastoral Function

But the function of every ecumenical council has always been to make

a solemn proclamation of the union that exists between Christ and His Church; to diffuse the light of truth; to give right guidance to men both as individuals and as members of a family and a society; to evoke and strengthen their spiritual resources; and to set their minds continually on those higher values which are genuine and unailing.

No study of human history during these twenty centuries of Christendom can fail to take note of the evidence of this extraordinary teaching authority of the Church as voiced in her general councils. The documents are there, whole volumes of them; a sacred heritage housed in the Roman archives and in the most famous libraries of the world.

THE DECISION TO HOLD THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

A Sudden Inspiration

As regards the immediate cause for this great event, which gathers you here together at Our bidding, it is sufficient for Us to put on record once more something which, though trifling in itself, made a deep impression on Us personally. The decision to hold an ecumenical council came to Us in the first instance in a sudden flash of inspiration. We communicated this decision, without elaboration, to the Sacred College of Cardinals on that memorable January 25, 1959, the feast of St. Paul's Conversion, in his patriarchal basilica in the Ostien Way.⁴ The response was immediate. It was as though some ray of supernatural light had entered the minds of all present: it was reflected in their faces; it shone from their eyes. At once the world was swept by a wave of enthusiasm, and men everywhere began to wait eagerly for the celebration of this Council.

Arduous Preparation

For three years the arduous work of preparation continued. It consisted in making a detailed and accurate analysis of the prevailing condition of the faith, the religious practice, and the vitality of the Christian, and particularly the Catholic, body.

We are convinced that the time spent in preparing for this Ecumenical Council was in itself an initial token of grace, a gift from heaven.

Hope for Spiritual Enrichment

For We have every confidence that the Church, in the light of this Council,

will gain in spiritual riches. New sources of energy will be opened to her, enabling her to face the future without fear. By introducing timely changes and a prudent system of mutual cooperation, We intend that the Church shall really succeed in bringing men, families and nations to the appreciation of supernatural values.

Thus the celebration of this Council becomes a compelling motive for whole-hearted thanksgiving to God, the giver of every good gift, and for exultantly proclaiming the glory of Christ the Lord, the triumphant and immortal King of ages and peoples.

THE TIMING OF THIS COUNCIL

And now, venerable brethren, there is another point that We would have you consider. Quite apart from the spiritual joy we all feel at this solemn moment of history, the very circumstances in which this Council is opening are supremely propitious. May We go on record as expressing this conviction openly before you now in full assembly.

Pessimistic Voices

In the daily exercise of Our pastoral office, it sometimes happens that We hear certain opinions which disturb Us—opinions expressed by people who, though fired with a commendable zeal for religion, are lacking in sufficient prudence and judgment in their evaluation of events. They can see nothing but calamity and disaster in the present state of the world. They say over and over that this modern age of ours, in comparison with past ages, is definitely deteriorating. One would think from their attitude that history, that great teacher of life, had taught them nothing. They seem to imagine that in the days of the earlier councils everything was as it should be so far as doctrine and morality and the Church's rightful liberty were concerned.

We feel that We must disagree with these prophets of doom, who are always forecasting worse disasters, as though the end of the world were at hand.

A Basis for Optimism

Present indications are that the human family is on the threshold of a new era. We must recognize here the hand of God, who, as the years roll by,

is ever directing men's efforts, whether they realize it or not, towards the fulfillment of the inscrutable designs of His providence, wisely arranging everything, even adverse human fortune, for the Church's good.

Civil Intervention Eliminated

As a simple example of what We mean, consider the extremely critical problems which exist today in the political and economic spheres. Men are so worried by these things that they give scant thought to those religious concerns, which are the province of the Church's teaching authority. All this is evil, and we are right to condemn it. But this new state of affairs has at least one undeniable advantage: it has eliminated the innumerable obstacles erected by worldly men to impede the Church's freedom of action. We have only to take a cursory glance through the annals of the Church to realize that even those ecumenical councils which are recorded there in letters of gold, were celebrated in the midst of serious difficulties and most distressing circumstances, through the unwarranted intervention of the civil authority. Such intervention was sometimes dictated by a sincere intention on the part of the secular princes to protect the Church's interests, but more often than not their motives were purely political and selfish, and the resultant situation was fraught with spiritual disadvantage and danger.

Earnest Prayer for Absent Bishops

We must indeed confess to you Our deep sorrow over the fact that so many bishops are missing today from your midst. They suffer imprisonment and every kind of disability because of their faith in Christ. The thought of these dear brothers of Ours impels Us to pray for them with great earnestness. Yet We are not without hope; and We have the immense consolation of knowing that the Church, freed at last from the worldly fetters that trammled her in past ages, can through you raise her majestic and solemn voice from this Vatican Basilica, as from a second Apostolic Cenacle.

THE COUNCIL'S PRINCIPAL DUTY: THE DEFENSE AND ADVANCEMENT OF TRUTH

The major interest of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred heritage of Christian truth be safeguarded and expounded with greater efficacy.

That doctrine embraces the whole man, body and soul. It bids us live as pilgrims here on earth, as we journey onwards towards our heavenly homeland.

Man's Twofold Obligation

It demonstrates how we must conduct this mortal life of ours. If we are to achieve God's purpose in our regard we have a twofold obligation: as citizens of earth, and as citizens of heaven. That is to say, all men without exception, both individually and in society, have a life-long obligation to strive after heavenly values through the right use of the things of this earth. These temporal goods must be used in such a way as not to jeopardize eternal happiness.

Seeking the Kingdom of God

True enough, Christ our Lord said: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His justice,"⁵ and this word "first" indicates what the primary direction of all our thoughts and energies must be. Nevertheless, we must not forget the rest of Our Lord's injunction: "and all these things shall be given you besides."⁶ Thus the traditional as well as the contemporary Christian approach to life is to strive with all zeal for evangelical perfection, and at the same time to contribute toward the material good of humanity. It is from the living example and the charitable enterprise of such Christians as these that all that is highest and noblest in human society takes its strength and growth.

Contributing to Society

If this doctrine is to make its impact on the various spheres of human activity—in private, family, and social life—then it is absolutely vital that the Church shall never for an instant lose sight of that sacred patrimony of truth inherited from the Fathers. But it is equally necessary for her to keep up to date with the changing conditions of this modern world, and of modern living, for these have opened up entirely new avenues for the Catholic apostolate.

Beyond Science

The Church has never been stinting in her admiration for the results of man's inventive genius and scientific progress, which have so revolutionized modern living. But neither has she been backward in assessing these new

developments at their true value. While keeping a watchful eye on these things, she has constantly exhorted men to look beyond such visible phenomena—to God, the source of all wisdom and beauty. Her constant fear has been that man, who was commanded to “subject the earth and rule it,”⁷ should in the process forget that other serious command: “The Lord thy God shalt thou worship, and Him only shalt thou serve.”⁸ Real progress must not be impeded by a passing infatuation for transient things.

BRINGING HOME THE CHURCH'S TEACHING TO THE MODERN WORLD

From what We have said, the doctrinal role of this present Council is sufficiently clear.

Transmitting the Truth Fearlessly

This twenty-first Ecumenical Council can draw upon the most effective and valued assistance of experts in every branch of sacred science, in the practical sphere of the apostolate, and in administration. Its intention is to give to the world the whole of that doctrine which, notwithstanding every difficulty and contradiction, has become the common heritage of mankind—to transmit it in all its purity, undiluted, undistorted.

It is a treasure of incalculable worth, not indeed coveted by all, but available to all men of good will.

And our duty is not just to guard this treasure, as though it were some museum-piece and we the curators, but earnestly and fearlessly to dedicate ourselves to the work that needs to be done in this modern age of ours, pursuing the path which the Church has followed for almost twenty centuries.

Nor are we here primarily to discuss certain fundamentals of Catholic doctrine, or to restate in greater detail the traditional teaching of the Fathers and of early and more recent theologians. We presume that these things are sufficiently well known and familiar to you all.

A Fresh Approach

There was no need to call a council merely to hold discussions of that nature. What is needed at the present time is a new enthusiasm, a new joy and serenity of mind in the unreserved acceptance by all of the entire Christian faith, without forfeiting that accuracy and precision in its

presentation which characterized the proceedings of the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council. What is needed, and what everyone imbued with a truly Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit craves today, is that this doctrine shall be more widely known, more deeply understood, and more penetrating in its effects on men's moral lives. What is needed is that this certain and immutable doctrine, to which the faithful owe obedience, be studied afresh and reformulated in contemporary terms. For this deposit of faith, or truths which are contained in our time-honored teaching is one thing; the manner in which these truths are set forth (with their meaning preserved intact) is something else.

This, then, is what will require our careful, and perhaps too our patient, consideration. We must work out ways and means of expounding these truths in a manner more consistent with a predominantly pastoral view of the Church's teaching office.

THE RIGHT WAY TO SUPPRESS ERROR

In these days, which mark the beginning of this Second Vatican Council, it is more obvious than ever before that the Lord's truth is indeed eternal. Human ideologies change. Successive generations give rise to varying errors, and these often vanish as quickly as they came, like mist before the sun.

The Church has always opposed these errors, and often condemned them with the utmost severity. Today, however, Christ's Bride prefers the balm of mercy to the arm of severity. She believes that, present needs are best served by explaining more fully the purport of her doctrines, rather than by publishing condemnations.

Contemporary Repudiation of Godlessness

Not that the need to repudiate and guard against erroneous teaching and dangerous ideologies is less today than formerly. But all such error is so manifestly contrary to rightness and goodness, and produces such fatal results, that our contemporaries show every inclination to condemn it of their own accord—especially that way of life which repudiates God and His law, and which places excessive confidence in technical progress and an exclusively material prosperity. It is more and more widely understood that personal dignity and true self-realization are of vital importance and worth every effort to achieve. More important still, experience has at

long last taught men that physical violence, armed might, and political domination are no help at all in providing a happy solution to the serious problems which affect them.

A Loving Mother

The great desire, therefore, of the Catholic Church in raising aloft at this Council the torch of truth, is to show herself to the world as the loving mother of all mankind; gentle, patient, and full of tenderness and sympathy for her separated children. To the human race oppressed by so many difficulties, she says what Peter once said to the poor man who begged an alms: "Silver and gold I have none; but what I have, that I give thee. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, arise and walk."⁹ In other words it is not corruptible wealth, nor the promise of earthly happiness, that the Church offers the world today, but the gifts of divine grace which, since they raise men up to the dignity of being sons of God, are powerful assistance and support for the living of a more fully human life. She unseals the fountains of her life-giving doctrine, so that men, illumined by the light of Christ, will understand their true nature and dignity and purpose. Everywhere, through her children, she extends the frontiers of Christian love, the most powerful means of eradicating the seeds of discord, the most effective means of promoting concord, peace with justice, and universal brotherhood.

PROMOTING UNITY OF THE CHRISTIAN AND HUMAN FAMILY

The Church's anxiety to promote and defend truth springs from her conviction that without the assistance of the whole of revealed doctrine man is quite incapable of attaining to that complete and steadfast unanimity which is associated with genuine peace and eternal salvation. For such is God's plan. He "wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."¹⁰

Unhappily, however, the entire Christian family has not as yet fully and perfectly attained to this visible unity in the truth. But the Catholic Church considers it her duty to work actively for the fulfillment of that great mystery of unity for which Christ prayed so earnestly to His heavenly Father on the eve of His great sacrifice. The knowledge that she is so intimately associated with that prayer is for her an occasion of ineffable

peace and joy. And why should she not rejoice sincerely when she sees Christ's prayer extending its salvific and ever increasing efficacy even over those who are not of her fold?

Reflection of That Unity Sought By Christ

Indeed, if we consider well the unity for which Christ prayed on behalf of His Church, it would seem to shine, as it were, with a threefold ray of supernatural, saving light. There is first of all that unity of Catholics among themselves which must always be kept steadfast and exemplary. There is also a unity of prayer and ardent longing prompting Christians separated from this Apostolic See to aspire to union with us. And finally there is a unity, which consists in the esteem and respect shown for the Catholic Church by members of various non-Christian religions.

Universality and Unity

It is therefore an overwhelming source of grief to us to know that, although Christ's blood has redeemed every man that is born into this world, there is still a great part of the human race that does not share in those sources of supernatural grace, which exist in the Catholic Church. And yet the Church sheds her light everywhere. The power that is hers by reason of her supernatural unity redounds to the advantage of the whole family of men. She amply justifies those magnificent words of St. Cyprian: "The Church, radiant with the light of her Lord, sheds her rays over all the world, and that light of hers remains one, though everywhere diffused; her corporate unity is not divided. She spreads her luxuriant branches over all the earth; she sends out her fair-flowing streams ever farther afield. But the head is one; the source is one. She is the one mother of countless generations. And we are her children, born of her, fed with her milk, animated with her breath."¹¹

Blazing a Trail

Such, venerable brethren, is the aim of the Second Vatican Council. It musters the Church's best energies and studies with all earnestness how to have the message of salvation more readily welcomed by men. By that very fact it blazes a trail that leads toward that unity of the human race, which is so necessary if this earthly realm of ours is to conform to the realm of heaven, "whose king is truth, whose law is love, whose duration is eternity."¹²

CONCLUSION

Thus, venerable brethren in the episcopate, “our heart is wide open to you.”¹³ Here we are assembled in this Vatican Basilica at a turning-point in the history of the Church; here at this meeting-place of earth and heaven, by St. Peter’s tomb and the tomb of so many of Our predecessors, whose ashes in this solemn hour seem to thrill in mystic exultation.

A Radiant Dawn

For with the opening of this Council a new day is dawning on the Church, bathing her in radiant splendor. It is yet the dawn, but the sun in its rising has already set our hearts aglow. All around is the fragrance of holiness and joy. Yet there are stars to be seen in this temple, enhancing its magnificence with their brightness. You are those stars, as witness the Apostle John;¹⁴ the churches you represent are golden candlesticks shining round the tomb of the Prince of Apostles.¹⁵ With you We see other dignitaries come to Rome from the five continents to represent their various nations. Their attitude is one of respect and warm-hearted expectation.

Saints, Faithful, and Council Fathers

Hence, it is true to say that the citizens of earth and heaven are united in the celebration of this Council. The role of the saints in heaven is to supervise our labors; the role of the faithful on earth, to offer concerted prayer to God; your role, to show prompt obedience to the supernatural guidance of the Holy Spirit and to do your utmost to answer the needs and expectations of every nation on earth. To do this you will need serenity of mind, a spirit of brotherly concord, moderation in your proposals, dignity in discussion, and wisdom in deliberation.

God grant that your zeal and your labors may abundantly fulfill these aspirations. The eyes of the world are upon you; and all its hopes.

Prayer for Divine Assistance

Almighty God, we have no confidence in our own strength; all our trust is in you. Graciously look down on these Pastors of your Church. Aid their counsels and their legislation with the light of your divine grace. Be pleased to hear the prayers we offer you, united in faith, in voice, in mind.

Mary, help of Christians, help of bishops; recently in your church at Loreto, where We venerated the mystery of the Incarnation,¹⁶ you gave us

a special token of your love. Prosper now this work of ours, and by your kindly aid bring it to a happy, successful conclusion. And do you, with St. Joseph your spouse, the holy apostles Peter and Paul, St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, intercede for us before the throne of God.

To Jesus Christ, our most loving Redeemer, the immortal King of all peoples and all ages, be love, power, and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

—October 11, 1962

NOTES

1 Luke 2:34.
2 Ibid. 10:16.
3 Ibid. 11:23.
4 See *The Encyclicals and Other Messages of John XXIII* (Washington, DC: TPS Press, 1964), 20–23.
5 Matt. 6:33.
6 Ibid.
7 Gen. 1:28.
8 Matt. 4:10; Luke 4:8.
9 Acts 3:6.
10 1 Tim. 2:4.
11 *De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate*, 5.
12 St. Augustine, Ep. 138, 3.
13 2 Cor. 6:11.
14 Rev. 1:20.
15 Ibid.
16 See *TPS*, VIII. 273–8.

DEI VERBUM

*Dogmatic Constitution on
Divine Revelation*



SOLEMNLY PROMULGATED *by* HIS HOLINESS
POPE PAUL VI
on NOVEMBER 18, 1965



A Call for Biblical Renewal

Introduction to *Dei Verbum* by Bishop Robert Barron

Vatican II's document on revelation, known by the first two words of the Latin text *Dei Verbum* (the Word of God), is of signal importance in the life of the Church, since it speaks of the process by which God communicates to his people. The entire purpose of this communication is to draw us into friendship with God. What could be more significant for all believers, but especially for teachers, catechists, theologians, and preachers?

It also has great significance for those embarked on the Church's mission of evangelization. The council fathers recognized the need for a renewal when it came to reading and appreciating the Bible. They called for greater study of the Bible among laypeople, placing the Scriptures more fully at the center of the liturgy, and making the sacred writings the "soul of sacred theology" (DV 24). But that dream is still, I believe, largely unrealized.

In point of fact, when we consult the numerous studies of the ever-increasing army of the religiously unaffiliated, we discover that the Bible is often a prime reason why people, especially young people, are alienated from the Christian faith. We hear that it is nonsense written by prescientific people who knew nothing about the way the world works; that it is bronze-age mythology; that it encourages genocide, violence against women, slavery, and militaristic aggression; that its central character is, in

the language of one atheist provocateur, like King Lear in Act Five, except more insane.

The insights of *Dei Verbum* can help Catholics recover the depth and power of the Bible in the twenty-first century, and hold off the many charges made against it.

DEI VERBUM

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

INTRODUCTION

1. Hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith, the sacred synod takes its direction from these words of St. John: “We announce to you the eternal life which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we announce to you, so that you may have fellowship with us and our common fellowship be with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:2–3). Therefore, following in the footsteps of the Council of Trent and of the First Vatican Council, this present council wishes to set forth authentic doctrine on divine revelation and how it is handed on, so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe, by believing it may hope, and by hoping it may love.¹

CHAPTER I

Revelation Itself

2. In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Pet. 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Exod. 33:11; John 15:14–15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so

that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation.²

3. God, who through the Word creates all things (see John 1:3) and keeps them in existence, gives men an enduring witness to Himself in created realities (see Rom. 1:19–20). Planning to make known the way of heavenly salvation, He went further and from the start manifested Himself to our first parents. Then after their fall His promise of redemption aroused in them the hope of being saved (see Gen. 3:15) and from that time on He ceaselessly kept the human race in His care, to give eternal life to those who perseveringly do good in search of salvation (see Rom. 2:6–7). Then, at the time He had appointed He called Abraham in order to make of him a great nation (see Gen. 12:2). Through the patriarchs, and after them through Moses and the prophets, He taught this people to acknowledge Himself the one living and true God, provident father and just judge, and to wait for the Savior promised by Him, and in this manner prepared the way for the Gospel down through the centuries.

4. Then, after speaking in many and varied ways through the prophets, “now at last in these days God has spoken to us in His Son” (Heb. 1:1–2). For He sent His Son, the eternal Word, who enlightens all men, so that He might dwell among men and tell them of the innermost being of God (see John 1:1–18). Jesus Christ, therefore, the Word made flesh, was sent as “a man to men.”³ He “speaks the words of God” (John 3:34), and completes the work of salvation which His Father gave Him to do (see John 5:36; John 17:4). To see Jesus is to see His Father (John 14:9). For this reason Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself: through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth. Moreover He confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed, that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal.

The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Tim. 6:14 and Titus 2:13).

The Self-Manifestation of God

Dei Verbum 2–4 | Bishop Barron

The first chapter of *Dei Verbum*, which deals directly with the question of revelation, speaks of God's gradual self-manifestation through his Word, culminating in the enfleshment of that Word in Jesus Christ. The document specifies that the purpose of this manifestation is none other than the drawing of human beings into friendship with God and participation in the divine life. Then comes that distinctive word *oeconomia*, which is repeated like a refrain throughout *Dei Verbum*: "This plan of revelation [*revelationis oeconomia*] . . ." One could not speak coherently of an economy unless there were an *economus* (overseer), some great mind and personality responsible for the rational arrangement of nature and history.

Next, *Dei Verbum* specifies that this pattern or economy of salvation unfolds *gestis verbisque*, by both "deeds and words." It thereby implies that revelation is never simply a verbal or intellectual matter but an affair of

factual history. In Thomas Aquinas' language, God has authority over both words and "things" and can use both for his communicative purposes. Now, this means that history cannot be construed in a purely linear way but must be interpreted as a coherent and artistically driven narrative, filled with allusions, anticipations, rhymes, echoes, meanings that double back upon themselves, typologies, and prophecies.

On *Dei Verbum*'s reading, this participatory view of history and nature is rooted in the creative power of the Word. God witnesses to himself through the orderliness and beauty of the created world and, in a more pointed way, through salvation history. *Dei Verbum* lays out the contours of sacred history—commencing with the call of Abraham and the other patriarchs, the giving of the Law through Moses, the summoning of the prophets, and finally the arrival of the Messiah—characterizing this *oeconomia* as a succession of covenants made between God and his people.



Pope Francis

Lumen Fidei 14

Not One Word Among Many

Dei Verbum 4

The word which God speaks to us in Jesus is not simply one word among many, but his eternal Word (see Heb. 1:1–2). God can give no greater guarantee of his love, as Saint Paul reminds us (see Rom. 8:31–39). Christian faith is thus faith in a perfect love, in its decisive power, in its ability to transform the world and to unfold its history. “We know and believe the love that God has for us” (1 John 4:16). In the love of God revealed in Jesus, faith perceives the foundation on which all reality and its final destiny rest.

5. “The obedience of faith” (Rom. 16:26; see 1:5; 2 Cor. 10:5–6) “is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,”⁴ and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him. To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving “joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it.”⁵ To bring about an ever deeper understanding of revelation the same Holy Spirit constantly brings faith to completion by His gifts.

6. Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, He chose to share with them those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind.⁶

As a sacred synod has affirmed, God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason (see Rom. 1:20); but teaches that it is through His revelation that those religious truths which are by their nature accessible to human reason can be known by all men with ease, with solid certitude and with no trace of error, even in this present state of the human race.⁷



**Pope
St. John Paul II**

Fides et Ratio 8

The Knowledge of Faith

Dei Verbum 6

Restating almost to the letter the teaching of the First Vatican Council's Constitution *Dei Filius*, and taking into account the principles set out by the Council of Trent, the Second Vatican Council's Constitution *Dei Verbum* pursued the age-old journey of *understanding faith*, reflecting on Revelation in the light of the teaching of Scripture and of the entire Patristic tradition. At the First Vatican Council, the Fathers had stressed the supernatural character of God's Revelation. On the basis of mistaken and very widespread assertions, the rationalist critique of the time attacked faith and denied the possibility of any knowledge which was not the fruit of reason's natural capacities. This obliged the Council to reaffirm emphatically that there exists a knowledge which is peculiar to faith, surpassing the knowledge proper to human reason, which nevertheless by its nature can discover the Creator. This knowledge expresses a truth based upon the very fact of God who reveals himself, a truth which is most certain, since God neither deceives nor wishes to deceive.

CHAPTER II

Handing on Divine Revelation

7. In His gracious goodness, God has seen to it that what He had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations. Therefore Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion (see Cor. 1:20; 3:13; 4:6), commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men that Gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching,¹ and to impart to them heavenly gifts. This Gospel had been promised in former times through the prophets, and Christ Himself had fulfilled it and promulgated it with His lips. This commission was faithfully fulfilled by

the Apostles who, by their oral preaching, by example, and by observances handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with Him, and from what He did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled, too, by those Apostles and apostolic men who under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing.²

But in order to keep the Gospel forever whole and alive within the Church, the Apostles left bishops as their successors, “handing over” to them “the authority to teach in their own place.”³ This sacred tradition, therefore, and Sacred Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments are like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything, until she is brought finally to see Him as He is, face to face (see 1 John 3:2).

8. And so the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved by an unending succession of preachers until the end of time. Therefore the Apostles, handing on what they themselves had received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they have learned either by word of mouth or by letter (see 2 Thess. 2:15), and to fight in defense of the faith handed on once and for all (see Jude 1:3).⁴ Now what was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the peoples of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes.

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit.⁵ For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke. 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.

The words of the holy fathers witness to the presence of this living tradition, whose wealth is poured into the practice and life of the believing and praying Church. Through the same tradition the Church’s full canon

of the sacred books is known, and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and unceasingly made active in her; and thus God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the bride of His beloved Son; and the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, and through her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them (see Col. 3:16).



**Pope
St. John Paul II**

*Dominum et
Vivificantem 4*

The Counselor of the Church

Dei Verbum 8

[Jesus tells his disciples:] “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). The Holy Spirit will be the Counselor of the Apostles and the Church, always present in their midst—even though invisible—as the teacher of the same Good News that Christ proclaimed. The words “he will teach” and “bring to remembrance” mean not only that he, in his own particular way, will continue to inspire the spreading of the Gospel of salvation but also that he will help people to understand the correct meaning of the content of Christ’s message; they mean that he will ensure continuity and identity of understanding in the midst of changing conditions and circumstances. The Holy Spirit, then, will ensure that in the Church there will always continue the same truth which the Apostles heard from their Master.

9. Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and

the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.⁶

Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition

Dei Verbum 8–10 | Bishop Barron

Through his providence, God has guaranteed that his revelation is preserved across the centuries, handed down from generation to generation. And Christ himself, the fullness of revelation, commissioned his Apostles to preach, and those Apostles chose successors, the bishops, to maintain this revelation in its integrity. This apostolic preaching, “which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved by an unending succession of preachers until the end of time.”

And this means that there is a very close connection between the Scriptures and what the Church calls “Tradition.”

In one of the most celebrated of its passages, *Dei Verbum* affirms that Scripture and Tradition both flow from the Holy Spirit—which is to say, from a power who properly transcends time and hence can effectively unite them. “For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end.” Thus we can say that “Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church.”

10. Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers (see Acts 2:42, Greek text), so that holding to,

practicing, and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort.⁷

But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on,⁸ has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church,⁹ whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.

It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.



**Pope
Benedict XVI**

Verbum Domini 7

The Religion of the Living Word

Dei Verbum 10

Human language operates analogically in speaking of the word of God. In effect, this expression, while referring to God's self-communication, also takes on a number of different meanings which need to be carefully considered and related among themselves, from the standpoint both of theological reflection and pastoral practice. As the Prologue of John clearly shows us, the Logos refers in the first place to the eternal Word, the only Son, begotten of the Father before all ages and consubstantial with him: the word was with God, and the word was God. But this same Word, Saint John tells us, "became flesh" (John 1:14); hence Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, is truly the Word of God who has become consubstantial with us. Thus the expression "word of God" here refers to the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the Father, made man.

While the Christ event is at the heart of divine revelation, we also need to realize that creation itself, the *liber naturae*, is an essential part of this symphony of many voices in which the one word is spoken. We also profess our faith that God has spoken his word in salvation history; he has made his voice heard; by the power of his Spirit “he has spoken through the prophets.” God’s word is thus spoken throughout the history of salvation, and most fully in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. Then too, the word of God is that word preached by the Apostles in obedience to the command of the Risen Jesus: “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). The word of God is thus handed on in the Church’s living Tradition. Finally, the word of God, attested and divinely inspired, is sacred Scripture, the Old and New Testaments. All this helps us to see that, while in the Church we greatly venerate the sacred Scriptures, the Christian faith is not a “religion of the book”: Christianity is the “religion of the word of God,” not of “a written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word.” Consequently the Scripture is to be proclaimed, heard, read, received, and experienced as the word of God, in the stream of the apostolic Tradition from which it is inseparable.

CHAPTER III

Sacred Scripture’s Divine Inspiration and Its Interpretation

11. Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19–20, 3:15–16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.¹ In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him² they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them,³ they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.⁴

The Authorship of God

Dei Verbum 11 | Bishop Barron

We hear that the sacred books were written under the influence of the Holy Spirit and hence “have God as their author” (*Deum habent auctorem*). That this does not amount to a naïve literalism is made clear in the immediately subsequent observation that “God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.” The ground for this paradoxical assertion is in the consistently biblical teaching that God relates to his creation noncompetitively, allowing it to flourish on its own even as he works through it. Perhaps the clearest Old Testament statement of this principle is in the twenty-sixth chapter of Isaiah when the prophet states, “You have accomplished all we have done” (Isa. 26:12).

But the idea comes to richest and most dramatic expression in the New Testament claim that God became human, without ceasing to be God and without compromising the integrity of

the creature he became. The Council of Chalcedon honored this biblical logic when it spoke of the two natures in Jesus coming together without mixing, mingling, or confusion. It thereby held off the triple threat of monophysitism (a one-sided stress on divinity), Nestorianism (a one-sided stress on humanity), and Arianism (a compromise of the two). The negation of all three positions was made possible by the distinctively biblical belief in God as Creator.

Extrapolating from this discussion, we can say with *Dei Verbum* that the true God is capable of working decisively through intelligent, created causes but in such a way that the full integrity and purposefulness of those causes is not compromised. On a more Nestorian reading of inspiration—prominent in much of modernity—one might speak of an independent human author speculating according to his lights, with perhaps a vague relationship to a distant God. On a monophysite reading, one might speak—as fundamentalists and literalists do—of a God who uses human agents in a domineering manner, essentially eliminating their own intelligence. Both fall short of the participative view on display in *Dei Verbum*.

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings⁵ for the sake of salvation. Therefore “all Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind” (2 Tim. 3:16–17, Greek text).

12. However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion,⁶ the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.

To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to “literary forms.” For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture.⁷ For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking, and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.⁸

But, since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written,⁹ no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith. It is the task of exegetes to work according to these rules toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgment of the Church may mature. For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church,

which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.¹⁰

The Diversity and Unity of the Scriptures

Dei Verbum 12 | Bishop Barron

Dei Verbum emphasizes the crucial importance of attending to authorial intention and “literary forms” in biblical interpretation. One should never approach a more straightforwardly historical text such as 1 Samuel with the same hermeneutical assumptions that one might employ to survey a text such as the book of the prophet Jonah.

But then it immediately affirms what would come to be called “canonical

criticism,” insisting that the Bible as a whole must be used as the interpretive matrix for any part of Scripture. *Dei Verbum* maintains that “since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out.” This principle is clearly violated in the measure that the recovery of the mind of the historical authors is the exclusive preoccupation of biblical hermeneutics.

13. In Sacred Scripture, therefore, while the truth and holiness of God always remains intact, the marvelous “condescension” of eternal wisdom is clearly shown, “that we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express, and how far He has gone in adapting His language with thoughtful concern for our weak human nature.”¹¹ For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men.

The Words of God in Human Language

Dei Verbum 13 | Bishop Barron

Dei Verbum declares that the Bible is “the words of God, expressed in human language.” That laconic statement packs a punch, for it clarifies why the fundamentalist strategy of scriptural interpretation is always dysfunctional. God did not dictate the Scriptures word for word to people who received the message dumbly and automatically. Rather, God spoke subtly and indirectly, precisely through human agents who employed distinctive literary techniques and who were conditioned by the cultures in which they found themselves and by the audiences they addressed. Thus, one of the most basic moves in scriptural exegesis is the determination of the genre in which a given biblical author was operating. Are we dealing with a song, a psalm, a history, a legend, a letter, a Gospel, a tall tale, an apocalypse? Therefore, to ask, “Do you take the Bible literally?” is about

as helpful as asking, “Do you take the library literally?”

A further implication of *Dei Verbum*’s statement is that there is a distinction between, as William Placher put it, what is in the Bible and what the Bible teaches. There are lots of things that are indeed in the pages of the Scriptures but that are not essential to the overarching message of the Scriptures. They were part of the cultural milieu of the human authors, but they are not ingredient in the revelation that God intends to offer. A good example of this would be the references to slavery. The institution of slavery was taken for granted in most ancient cultures, and therefore it is not surprising that biblical authors would refer to it or even praise it. But attention to the great patterns and trajectories of the Bible as a whole reveal that the justification of slavery is not something that “the Bible teaches,” which is precisely why the fight against slavery in Western culture was led by people deeply shaped by the Scriptures.

CHAPTER IV

The Old Testament

14. In carefully planning and preparing the salvation of the whole human race the God of infinite love, by a special dispensation, chose for Himself a people to whom He would entrust His promises. First He entered into a covenant with Abraham (see Gen. 15:18) and, through Moses, with the people of Israel (see Exod. 24:8). To this people which He had acquired for Himself, He so manifested Himself through words and deeds as the one true and living God that Israel came to know by experience the ways of God with men. Then too, when God Himself spoke to them through the mouth of the prophets, Israel daily gained a deeper and clearer understanding of His ways and made them more widely known among the nations (see Ps. 21:29; 95:1–3; Isa. 2:1–5; Jer. 3:17). The plan of salvation foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books, therefore, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable. “For all that was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

15. The principal purpose to which the plan of the old covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ, the redeemer of all and of the messianic kingdom, to announce this coming by prophecy (see Luke 24:44; John 5:39; 1 Pet. 1:10), and to indicate its meaning through various types (see 1 Cor. 10:12). Now the books of the Old Testament, in accordance with the state of mankind before the time of salvation established by Christ, reveal to all men the knowledge of God and of man and the ways in which God, just and merciful, deals with men. These books, though they also contain some things which are incomplete and temporary, nevertheless show us true divine pedagogy.¹ These same books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, contain a store of sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence.

16. God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New.² For, though Christ established the new covenant in His blood

(see Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), still the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel,³ acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament (see Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27; Rom. 16:25–26; 2 Cor. 3:14–16) and in turn shed light on it and explain it.

The Old Testament

Dei Verbum 14–16 | Bishop Barron

“The plan of salvation foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books, therefore, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable.” With this statement, *Dei Verbum* is eager to hold off all forms of Marcionism, an early heresy of the Church that sought to abstract Jesus from the Old Testament and the history of Israel.

The ultimate purpose of the Old Testament books is to prepare for the coming of Christ—through prophecy, to be sure, but also through what the tradition calls “types.” This is a style of reading the Old Testament typical of the Church Fathers, wherein some word, event, or person is construed as a symbolic anticipation of Jesus. So Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, etc. are all

Old Testament anticipatory signs, as are the Exodus, the conquest of the Promised Land, the Babylonian exile, the bronze serpent in the desert, Mt. Sinai, etc. Salvation history consistently rhymes.

Dei Verbum 15 again uses the term *oeconomia* (plan) to describe the structuring logic of both salvation history and the Bible itself, and it states clearly that this *oeconomia* is directed to Christ. To be sure, the Old Testament texts have their own spiritual integrity, but they are particularly revered by Christians in the measure that “in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way,” under signs and symbols. Echoing Augustine’s famous formula, *Dei Verbum* says that because God is the “inspirer and author” (*inspirator et auctor*) of both Testaments, he “wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New.”

CHAPTER V

The New Testament

17. The word of God, which is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe (see Rom. 1:16), is set forth and shows its power in a most excellent way in the writings of the New Testament. For when the fullness of time arrived (see Gal. 4:4), the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us in His fullness of graces and truth (see John 1:14). Christ established the kingdom of God on earth, manifested His Father and Himself by deeds and words, and completed His work by His death, resurrection, and glorious Ascension and by the sending of the Holy Spirit. Having been lifted up from the earth, He draws all men to Himself (see John 12:32, Greek text), He who alone has the words of eternal life (see John 6:68). This mystery had not been manifested to other generations as it was now revealed to His holy Apostles and prophets in the Holy Spirit (see Eph. 3:4–6, Greek text), so that they might preach the Gospel, stir up faith in Jesus, Christ and Lord, and gather together the Church. Now the writings of the New Testament stand as a perpetual and divine witness to these realities.



**Pope
St. John Paul II**

Fides et Ratio 94

The Meaning of the Gospels

Dei Verbum 18

The truth of the biblical texts, and of the Gospels in particular, is certainly not restricted to the narration of simple historical events or the statement of neutral facts, as historicist positivism would claim. Beyond simple historical occurrence, the truth of the events which these texts relate lies rather in the meaning they have *in* and *for* the history of salvation. This truth is elaborated fully in the Church's constant reading of these texts over the centuries, a reading which preserves intact their original meaning. There is a pressing need, therefore, that the relationship between fact and meaning, a relationship which constitutes the specific sense of history, be examined also from the philosophical point of view.

18. It is common knowledge that among all the Scriptures, even those of the New Testament, the Gospels have a special preeminence, and rightly so, for they are the principal witness for the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, our savior.

The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what the Apostles preached in fulfillment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of faith, namely, the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.¹

19. Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven (see Acts 1:1). Indeed, after the Ascension of the Lord the Apostles handed on to their hearers what He had said and done. This they did with that clearer understanding which they enjoyed² after they had been instructed by the glorious events of Christ's life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth.³ The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches and preserving the form of proclamation but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus.⁴ For their intention in writing was that either from their own memory and recollections, or from the witness of those who "themselves from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word" we might know "the truth" concerning those matters about which we have been instructed (see Luke 1:2–4).

20. Besides the four Gospels, the canon of the New Testament also contains the epistles of St. Paul and other apostolic writings, composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by which, according to the wise plan of God, those matters which concern Christ the Lord are confirmed, His true teaching is more and more fully stated, the saving power of the divine work of Christ is preached, the story is told of the beginnings of the Church and its marvelous growth, and its glorious fulfillment is foretold.

For the Lord Jesus was with His apostles as He had promised (see Matt. 28:20) and sent them the advocate Spirit who would lead them into the fullness of truth (see John 16:13).

CHAPTER VI

Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church

21. The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body. She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith, since, as inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles. Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the

Easy Access to Scripture

Dei Verbum 21–22 | Bishop Barron

In the sixth and final chapter of *Dei Verbum*, we find a discussion of the role of Scripture in the life of the Church today. The council fathers couldn't be clearer as to the importance of the Bible: "The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of

God's word and of Christ's body." The Bible is "food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life."

Therefore, "easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful." The emphasis of the Vatican II fathers on making the Scriptures available to all, especially through "correct translations" in "different languages," offers a resounding answer to the old Protestant charge that the Catholic Church does not want to offer the Bible to the people of God.

strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. Consequently these words are perfectly applicable to Sacred Scripture: “For the word of God is living and active” (Heb. 4:12) and “it has power to build you up and give you your heritage among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32; see 1 Thess. 2:13).



**Pope
Benedict XVI**

Verbum Domini 59

Bringing the Scripture to Life

Dei Verbum 21

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, I pointed out that “given the importance of the word of God, the quality of homilies needs to be improved. The homily ‘is part of the liturgical action’ and is meant to foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful.” The homily is a means of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realize that God’s word is present and at work in their everyday lives. It should lead to an understanding of the mystery being celebrated, serve as a summons to mission, and prepare the assembly for the profession of faith, the universal prayer, and the Eucharistic liturgy. Consequently, those who have been charged with preaching by virtue of a specific ministry ought to take this task to heart. Generic and abstract homilies which obscure the directness of God’s word should be avoided, as well as useless digressions which risk drawing greater attention to the preacher than to the heart of the Gospel message. The faithful should be able to perceive clearly that the preacher has a compelling desire to present Christ, who must stand at the center of every homily. For this reason preachers need to be in close and constant contact with the sacred text; they should prepare for the homily by meditation and prayer, so as to preach with conviction and passion.

22. Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful. That is why the Church from the very beginning accepted as her own that very ancient Greek translation; of the Old Testament which is called the septuagint; and she has always given a place of honor to other Eastern translations and Latin ones especially the Latin translation known as the vulgate. But since the word of God should be accessible at all times, the Church by her authority and with maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books. And should the opportunity arise and the Church authorities approve, if these translations are produced in cooperation with the separated brethren as well, all Christians will be able to use them.

23. The bride of the incarnate Word, the Church taught by the Holy Spirit, is concerned to move ahead toward a deeper understanding of the Sacred Scriptures so that she may increasingly feed her sons with the divine words. Therefore, she also encourages the study of the holy Fathers of both East and West and of sacred liturgies. Catholic exegetes then and other students

The Church Fathers

Dei Verbum 23 | Bishop Barron

The council fathers explicitly recommend the study of the Church Fathers, both East and West, as a privileged way of coming to know the meaning of Scripture. We don't just pick up the Bible and read it; rather, we read the sacred texts within the tradition and through the liturgy.

Like so many of the other texts of Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* itself is best read under the rubric of *ressourcement* (or "return to the sources"), the recovery of the biblical and patristic

roots of the Christian faith. The great *ressourcement* theologians of the twentieth century, many of whom were *periti* at the council, tended to engage modernity in an oblique manner. Unlike their liberal colleagues who endeavored to present Christian theology in a straightforwardly modern form, the *ressourcement* masters—de Lubac, Balthasar, Ratzinger, Daniélou—attempted to assimilate the best of modernity to the patristic form of the faith. They took modernity in, but they adapted and corralled it, making it ancillary to classical Christianity.

of sacred theology, working diligently together and using appropriate means, should devote their energies, under the watchful care of the sacred teaching office of the Church, to an exploration and exposition of the divine writings. This should be so done that as many ministers of the divine word as possible will be able effectively to provide the nourishment of the Scriptures for the people of God, to enlighten their minds, strengthen their wills, and set men's hearts on fire with the love of God.¹ The sacred synod encourages the sons of the Church and Biblical scholars to continue energetically, following the mind of the Church, with the work they have so well begun, with a constant renewal of vigor.²

24. Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word. For the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and since they are inspired really are the word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology.³ By the same word of Scripture the ministry of the word also, that is, pastoral preaching, catechetics, and all Christian instruction, in which the liturgical homily must hold the foremost place, is nourished in a healthy way and flourishes in a holy way.

The Soul of Sacred Theology

Dei Verbum 24 | Bishop Barron

The Vatican II fathers call for a sort of *circumincessio* of biblical exegesis and theology, each one conditioning and informing the other. When they

speak of the Bible as “the soul of sacred theology,” they imply that Scripture animates theology and that theology instantiates and gives concrete expression to the meaning of Scripture.

25. Therefore, all the clergy must hold fast to the Sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study, especially the priests of Christ and others, such as deacons and catechists who are legitimately active in

the ministry of the word. This is to be done so that none of them will become “an empty preacher of the word of God outwardly, who is not a listener to it inwardly”⁴ since they must share the abundant wealth of the divine word with the faithful committed to them, especially in the sacred liturgy. The sacred synod also earnestly and especially urges all the Christian faithful, especially Religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the “excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:8). “For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”⁵ Therefore, they should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids which, in our time, with approval and active support of the shepherds of the Church, are commendably spread everywhere. And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for “we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine saying.”⁶

It devolves on sacred bishops “who have the apostolic teaching”⁷ to give the faithful entrusted to them suitable instruction in the right use of the divine books, especially the New Testament and above all the Gospels. This can be done through translations of the sacred texts, which are to be provided with the necessary and really adequate explanations so that the children of the Church may safely and profitably become conversant with the Sacred Scriptures and be penetrated with their spirit.

Furthermore, editions of the Sacred Scriptures, provided with suitable footnotes, should be prepared also for the use of non-Christians and adapted to their situation. Both pastors of souls and Christians generally should see to the wise distribution of these in one way or another.

26. In this way, therefore, through the reading and study of the sacred books “the word of God may spread rapidly and be glorified” (2 Thess. 3:1) and the treasure of revelation, entrusted to the Church, may more and more fill the hearts of men. Just as the life of the Church is strengthened through more frequent celebration of the Eucharistic mystery, similarly we may hope for a new stimulus for the life of the Spirit from a growing reverence for the word of God, which “lasts forever” (Isa. 40:8; see 1 Pet. 1:23–25).

A Call to All the Faithful

Dei Verbum 25–26 | Bishop Barron

The final paragraphs of *Dei Verbum* affirm that the clergy “must hold fast to the Sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study, especially the priests of Christ and others, such as deacons and catechists who are legitimately active in the ministry of the word.”

But we also hear that “all the Christian faithful” are to be immersed in the Bible, whether through the liturgy or devotional reading or careful study.

The bishops, we are also told, have a prime responsibility here in instructing the faithful.

Dei Verbum concludes: “Just as the life of the Church is strengthened through more frequent celebration of the Eucharistic mystery, similarly we may hope for a new stimulus for the life of the Spirit from a growing reverence for the word of God, which ‘lasts forever.’” Given this strongly worded conclusion, it is fair to ask: Have either of these revivals envisioned by the council, Eucharistic or scriptural, happened yet?

NOTES

PREFACE

- 1 See St. Augustine, “De Catechizandis Rudibus,” C.IV 8: PL. 40, 316.

CHAPTER I

- 2 See Matt. 11:27; John 1:14 and 17; 14:6; 17:1–3; 2 Cor. 3:16 and 4:6; Eph. 1:3–14.
- 3 Epistle to Diognetus, c. VII, 4: Funk, Apostolic Fathers, I, p. 403.
- 4 First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Chap. 3, “On Faith”: Denzinger 1789 (3008).
- 5 Second Council of Orange, Canon 7: Denzinger 180 (377); First Vatican Council, loc. cit.: Denzinger 1791 (3010).
- 6 First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Chap. 2, “On Revelation”: Denzinger 1786 (3005).
- 7 Ibid.: Denzinger 1785 and 1786 (3004 and 3005).

CHAPTER II

- 1 See Matt. 28:19–20, and Mark 16:15; Council of Trent, session IV, Decree on Scriptural Canons: Denzinger 783 (1501).

- 2 See Council of Trent, loc. cit.; First Vatican Council, session III, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Chap. 2, "On revelation:" Denzinger 1787 (3005).
- 3 St. Irenaeus, "Against Heretics" III, 3, 1: PG 7, 848; Harvey, 2, p. 9.
- 4 See Second Council of Nicea: Denzinger 303 (602); Fourth Council of Constance, session X, Canon 1: Denzinger 336 (650–652).
- 5 See First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Chap. 4, "On Faith and Reason:" Denzinger 1800 (3020).
- 6 See Council of Trent, session IV, loc. cit.: Denzinger 783 (1501).
- 7 See Pius XII, apostolic constitution, "Munificentissimus Deus," Nov. 1, 1950: A.A.S. 42 (1950) p. 756; Collected Writings of St. Cyprian, Letter 66, 8: Hartel, III, B, p. 733: "The Church [is] people united with the priest and the pastor together with his flock."
- 8 See First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Chap. 3 "On Faith:" Denzinger 1792 (3011).
- 9 See Pius XII, encyclical "Humani Generis," Aug. 12, 1950: A.A.S. 42 (1950) pp. 568–69: Denzinger 2314 (3886).

CHAPTER III

- 1 See First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Chap. 2 "On Revelation:" Denzinger 1787 (3006); Biblical Commission, Decree of June 18, 1915: Denzinger 2180 (3629): EB 420; Holy Office, Epistle of Dec. 22, 1923: EB 499.
- 2 See Pius XII, encyclical "Divino Afflante Spiritu," Sept. 30, 1943: A.A.S. 35 (1943) p. 314; Enchiridion Bible. (EB) 556.
- 3 "In" and "for" man: see Heb. 1, and 4:7; ("in"): 2 Sam. 23:2; Matt. 1:22 and various places; ("for"): First Vatican Council, Schema on Catholic Doctrine, note 9: Coll. Lac. VII, 522.
- 4 Leo XIII, encyclical "Providentissimus Deus," Nov. 18, 1893: Denzinger 1952 (3293); EB 125.
- 5 See St. Augustine, "Gen. ad Litt." 2, 9, 20: PL 34, 270–271; Epistle 82, 3: PL 33, 277: CSEL 34, 2, p. 354. St. Thomas, "On Truth," Q. 12, A. 2, C. Council of Trent, session IV, Scriptural Canons: Denzinger 783 (1501). Leo XIII, encyclical "Providentissimus Deus:" EB 121, 124, 126–127. Pius XII, encyclical "Divino Afflante Spiritu:" EB 539.
- 6 St. Augustine, "City of God" XVII, 6, 2 PL 41, 537: CSEL. XL, 2, 228.
- 7 St. Augustine, "On Christian Doctrine" III, 18, 26; PL 34, 75–76.
- 8 Pius XII, loc. cit. Denzinger 2294 (3829–3830); EB 557–562.
- 9 See Benedict XV, encyclical "Spiritus Paraclitus," Sept. 15, 1920: EB 469. St. Jerome, "In Galatians" 5, 19–20: PL 26, 417 A.
- 10 See First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Chapter 2, "On Revelation:" Denzinger 1788 (3007).
- 11 St. John Chrysostom "In Genesis" 3, 8 (Homily 17, 1): PG 53, 134; "Attemperatio" [in English "Suitable adjustment"] in Greek "synkatabasis."

CHAPTER IV

- 1 Pius XI, encyclical "Mit Brennender Sorge," March 14, 1937: A.A.S. 29 (1937) p. 51.
- 2 St. Augustine, "Quest. in Hept." 2,73: PL 34,623.
- 3 St. Irenaeus, "Against Heretics" III, 21,3: PG 7,950; (Same as 25,1: Harvey 2, p. 115). St. Cyril of Jerusalem, "Catech." 4,35; PG 33,497. Theodore of Mopsuestia, "In Soph." 1, 4–6: PG 66, 452D–453A.

CHAPTER V

- 1 See St. Irenaeus, “Against Heretics” III, 11, 8: PG 7,885, Sagnard Edition, p. 194.
- 2 See John 14:26; 16:13.
- 3 John 2:22; 12:16; see 14:26; 16:12–13; 7:39.
- 4 See instruction “Holy Mother Church” edited by Pontifical Consilium for Promotion of Bible Studies; A.A.S. 56 (1964) p. 715.

CHAPTER VI

- 1 See Pius XII, encyclical “Divino Afflante Spiritu:” EB 551, 553, 567. Pontifical Biblical Commission, Instruction on Proper Teaching of Sacred Scripture in Seminaries and Religious Colleges, May 13, 1950: A.A.S. 42 (1950) pp. 495–505.
- 2 See Pius XII, *ibid.*: EB 569.
- 3 See Leo XIII, encyclical “Providentissimus Deus:” EB 114; Benedict XV, encyclical “Spiritus Paraclitus”: EB 483.
- 4 St. Augustine Sermons, 179, 1: PL 38, 966.
- 5 St. Jerome, Commentary on Isaiah, Prol.: PL 24, 17. see Benedict XV, encyclical “Spiritus Paraclitus”: EB 475–480; Pius XII, encyclical “Divino Afflante Spiritu”: EB 544.
- 6 St. Ambrose, On the Duties of Ministers I, 20, 88: PL 16, 50.
- 7 St. Irenaeus, “Against Heretics” IV, 32,1: PG 7, 1071; (Same as 49,2) Harvey, 2, p. 255.