

*IN CELEBRATION OF THE YEAR OF FAITH*  
*October 11, 2012 – November 24, 2013*

*AT THE CATHEDRAL PARISH OF SAINT RAPHAEL*  
*in Madison, Wisconsin*

## **THE DOCUMENTS OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL**

### **DEI VERBUM IV – SCRIPTURE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

#### **A. Sacred Scripture in the Liturgy**

1. The Council intended that the liturgy should offer the faithful a richer experience of Sacred Scripture.

*... [E]specially in the sacred liturgy, [the Church] unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body. (DV 21)*

Since the Council, readings from Sacred Scripture have become a more prominent part of our experience of the Mass – and that has been a very positive change.

In the first place, we do hear the readings:

In the Tridentine Mass, readings were done in Latin facing the altar.

When I was a boy, the priest only repeated in English one or two verses of the Gospel as his point of departure for the sermon.

A good argument can be made for offering Mass prayers *ad orientem*, but not for proclaiming the readings that way.

The prayers of the Mass are being offered to God

– everyone facing God with the priest at the head makes sense – but the readings are coming from God to us.

We are exposed to much more of Sacred Scripture than we previously were – in the three-year cycle of Sunday readings, and two-year weekday cycle; in hearing much more of the Old Testament, and seeing “fulfillment.”

After the Council, there was an excess of zeal among some liturgists who argued that since the celebration of any Sacrament is liturgical, there should always be a reading from Sacred Scripture.

Any priest who has listened to a class of second graders read him the parable of the Prodigal Son – one after the other – in their First Confessions can tell you that that wasn't necessarily a very good idea.

2. The Council intended that preaching should be more Scriptural.

*[The Church] has always maintained [the Sacred Scriptures], and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith . . . Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture. (DV 21)*

That has certainly happened.

One of my high school classmates told me that his parish priest always preached on the Ten Commandments and the Seven Sacraments – he worked his way through the Commandments, then the Sacraments, then the Commandments again and so on. That was probably not ideal.

Giving good Scriptural homilies is not always easy.

I'm pretty sure that some of us are better at it than others.  
Sermons on the Commandments might be easier.

It may be that our preaching has become Scriptural to a fault.

The General Instruction says that the homily “*should be an exposition of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary [which would include the Creed] or from the Proper of the Mass of the day . . .*” Maybe we should at times look to those other sources.

3. The Council intended that we should experience the Scriptural readings as a source of nourishment in our spiritual lives.

I quoted this passage in my first talk on *Dei Verbum*. It is a beautiful one:  
*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 strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. (DV 21)*

This hope of the Council has probably not been very well realized.

- We have a short attention span – three readings might be a lot for us to take in.
- Technical limitations (quality of reading, quality of sound system, noise in Church)
- We do not always come to Mass prepared to listen and expecting to hear the Lord.
- For a time, the “sexist language wars” were a very unfortunate distraction.

## B. Sacred Scripture in private prayer and study

1. Easy access to the Scriptures should be provided for all the Christian faithful, so there should be good modern translations made from the original languages.

*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. (DV 22)*

This is not a new principle. It was the motivation behind:

- use of the Septuagint – the 1<sup>st</sup> century Greek version of the Old Testament
- the Vulgate – the translation of the Old and New Testaments into Latin
- translations into modern languages – which began before the Reformation

The old accusation that the Catholic Church forbade the translation of the Bible from Latin is not accurate.

There were fourteen medieval translations of the Bible into German before Luther's. Though some translations were condemned because they were tendentious – slanted to support a particular heretical position (like the “New World Translation” used by the Jehovah Witnesses today).

2. In *Dei Verbum*, the faithful are encouraged to read Sacred Scripture:

*. . . 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." "For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." [St. Augustine] (DV 25)*

The old stereotypes that Catholics were forbidden to read the Bible were never really accurate.

The reading of Sacred Scripture was an indulgenced activity. An old Bible that we had at home when I was growing up – the Douay-Rheims version in a 1941 printing – said very prominently on one of the first pages that there was an indulgence of 300 days for devoutly reading Sacred Scripture for at least 15 minutes.

It is true that in reaction the Reformation – as well as to other prior heretical movements – there was a certain fear that by taking some verses of the Bible out of context, one could be led into serious error.

This was not a frivolous concern – and isn't even today.

In my earlier years at a parish here in Madison: a gentleman in the parish was participating in a Bible study, and very soberly told me that he had discovered by studying the Acts of the Apostles that the first Christians were meeting on the Sabbath (Saturday), and so the Church had slipped up in making Sunday our day for worship. How easily a new religion can start from the free-lance reading of the Bible!

*Dei Verbum* comes out strongly for the devotional reading of the Scriptures, and does not express any caution too directly . . . though it does use language suggesting that the goal of reading Scripture privately is to hear the Lord speaking to us, not the discernment of doctrine.

*. . . And let [the faithful] 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." [St. Ambrose] (DV 25)*

### 3. Private Scripture Study

A note of caution is inserted when *Dei Verbum* says that bishops are responsible for providing their people with access to Sacred Scripture, and helping them to use it fruitfully.

*. . . [T]ranslations of the sacred texts . . . 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. (DV 25)*

Note the word “safely” – this is an echo of the traditional caution. Good commentaries and study materials are a safeguard against things being taken out of context and misinterpreted.

In fact, new translations – much more accessible to a modern English-speaker – were done. And the fruitful study of Sacred Scripture has certainly grown since the Council.

## C. Theology

### 1. Scripture Scholarship

Last week, we looked in some detail at the balanced attitude of Popes Leo XIII (1893) and Pius XII (1943):

They acknowledged that the linguistic and historical study of Scripture as the product of human authorship could be valuable;  
but they also wanted to reaffirm that the Holy Spirit is the Divine Author of the Scriptures, so that they are reliable and authoritative.

In the typically positive tone of the documents of Vatican II,

*Dei Verbum* omits any explicit note of caution (though not neglecting to mention that the work must be done “following the mind of the Church.”)

*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. (DV 23)*

*Dei Verbum* does continue to make the point that the study of Scripture must be done within a larger context:

*. . . [T]he 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. (DV 23)*

This is a very interesting point: not just that the Fathers of the Church (Tradition) and the liturgies (*Lex orandi, lex credendi*) should be studied in addition to Scripture, but that studying these other sources (from the Tradition) helps the exegete to understand Scripture itself better.

What really happened?

- In the first place, some crazy things happened.

After one of the Masses last week, a woman in the parish told me how she had been a student at Marquette in the 1960's, and was told in a Scripture class that we now know that Jesus must have spent a good deal of time in India and got much of his teaching there.

- While the study of Scripture did become more technically sophisticated, it has become in many cases a merely technical, historical, linguistic analysis. This was my own experience in the seminary.

If you can picture the county coroner's examination room – with a cold metal table under harsh lights for autopsies – that's exactly how I felt in Scripture classes. The text was being taken apart with a scalpel to examine exactly what might have gone on in the process of human authorship. But I don't remember even once coming out of a Scripture class with the sense that I was more convinced of the truth of the Faith, or that I had a new insight into what the words and actions of Jesus should mean for us.

- Again, personal experience in the seminary – which is now, already, almost thirty years old. While the professors I had and the sources we used were not radically hostile to the miraculous (like Schleiermacher, whom I mentioned last week), they did not look at Sacred Scripture with the eyes of faith.

After ordination, I sat in on a seminary lecture in which it was observed that the Magnificat of the Blessed Virgin Mary bears a strong resemblance to a hymn of thanksgiving uttered by Hannah, the mother of Samuel, in the Old Testament. In my own seminary

education, the next statement out of the professors mouth would have been, “So, the Magnificat is clearly a Lucan composition put on to the lips of Mary.” But in the lecture I heard, the professor said instead: “Of course, Mary was a devout person and would have been acquainted with the song of Hannah. It would have been natural for her to model her own words on those that she knew very well.”

## 2. The Scriptures in Theology and Catechesis

*Dei Verbum* called for Scripture to be more prominent in the study of other branches of theology as well as in catechetical instruction.

*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. By the same word of Scripture the ministry of the word also, that is, pastoral preaching, catechetics and all Christian instruction . . .*

By and large, this has been done:

Courses in Dogmatic Theology are very likely to begin with the testimony of Sacred Scripture – rather than relying only on a handbooks of propositions.

Students in catechetical programs are generally familiarized with the organization of the Bible, and taken there to see the parables of Jesus or the events of salvation history.

There is always room for improvement. Just within the last couple of years, we have followed the lead of the diocesan Seat of Wisdom Institute to add an overview of Salvation History as seen in Sacred Scripture to our Main Event.

## D. The Spirit of Vatican II

In many ways, the hopes of the Council – that the Scriptures would play a more prominent part in Catholic life – have been realized.

Those beautiful words from paragraph 21:

*. . . the Father . . . meets His children with great love and speaks with them . . .*  
remain an ideal not yet fully achieved.

That must be what we try to experience each time we hear the readings of the Mass, or when we read the Scriptures privately.

A good challenge for us this Advent! – *Advent Companion* available next week.