

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* II – SCRIPTURE, TRADITION & MAGISTERIUM**

Chapter II of *Dei Verbum* is entitled “Handing on Divine Revelation.”

In this chapter, three important topics are discussed: Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium – the teaching authority of the Church.

When Catholics of a certain age hear the words “Scripture” and “Tradition” used together, we think immediately of one of the classic Reformation controversies – one that has been with us for the last five hundred years.

The controversy is usually put like this:

Protestants believe in Scripture alone;
Catholics believe in Scripture + Tradition.

As we look at what *Dei Verbum* has to say about Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium, we will get a new appreciation of our Catholic understanding.

A. Scripture

The very first point *Dei Verbum* makes about Scripture is not found in any quotation in the text, but in how this whole document is organized.

The first chapter of *Dei Verbum* (which we looked at last week) is titled “Revelation Itself.” In that chapter, Revelation (Itself) is described as God acting – acting to create, acting to call Abraham, and finally acting to reveal Himself fully by sending His Divine Son.

Chapter II of *Dei Verbum* is entitled “Handing on Divine Revelation.”

Chapter II begins with these words:

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.”

That is the subject of this chapter: the handing on of Divine Revelation. And this is where *Dei Verbum* talks about Sacred Scripture.

Sacred Scripture is quoted in the first chapter, but it is discussed as being part of “Revelation itself.”

The very clear message there is that Sacred Scripture is not “Revelation itself,” but rather a means by which Divine Revelation is handed on.

This structure very clearly conveys the Catholic understanding that Sacred Scripture is not Revelation Itself. God’s Revelation of Himself is not a matter of giving us a document.

“Revelation Itself” is accomplished in action accompanied by word.

For example: At the Annunciation, God begins to fully and finally reveal Himself by sending His Son to be born of the Virgin Mary. The act of the Holy Spirit overshadowing the Blessed Virgin (so that she conceives the Lord) is accompanied by the word of the angel, so that Mary can have at least some understanding of what is happening. The action of God in sending His Divine Son, accompanied by the explanatory word of the Archangel Gabriel – that constitutes “The Revelation.”

The Annunciation is recorded in St. Luke’s Gospel, but those verses from St. Luke are not “The Revelation.” The Gospel gives us a record of the Revelation. The Revelation took place at the moment of the Annunciation. What happened there was first proclaimed in preaching, and then committed to writing so that it can be reliably known by believers down through the ages.

Fundamentally, though, God did not reveal Himself by giving us a story about sending His Son into the world; He revealed Himself by actually sending His Son, who spoke and acted, into the world.

The Catholic understanding – and the historical reality – is that the Bible did not drop from heaven as a book. And God did not even give the sacred authors words to write about things that would otherwise have been completely unknown to them.

The books of the New Testament are inspired and written with the help of the Holy Spirit, but they were also written as the result of the human authors actually having seen what had happened in the life of the Lord Jesus or the infant Church (or having been told about it by those who had seen it with human eyes).

It was the Person of Jesus Himself, speaking and acting, that is Revelation Itself. Sacred Scripture is the written record, produced to preserve the memory of what God has done in act to make Himself known.

B. Tradition

As the historical dispute between Catholics and Protestants is usually been summarized –
Protestants believe in Scripture alone;
Catholics believe in Scripture + Tradition
-- someone could have the image of Scripture and Tradition as two separate sources standing next to each other.

“Tradition” is not a “second book” standing alongside Sacred Scripture.

What has been said about Sacred Scripture already helps us to understand what Tradition is.

Without using the word “Tradition,” *Dei Verbum* describes it in this passage:

7. Therefore Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion, . . . [Remember: the Person of Christ Himself is The Revelation.]

[Christ the Lord] . . . commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men that Gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching, and to impart to them heavenly gifts. . . . This commission was faithfully fulfilled by the Apostles who, by their oral preaching, by example, and by observances handed on . . . [That’s Tradition! Tradition means “that which is handed on.”]

[The Apostles 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. [And that is where Sacred Scripture comes in.]

The Tradition – the “handing on” – begins long before the message is committed to writing in the composition of the books of Sacred Scripture. And the Tradition is much “bigger” than Sacred Scripture, if you will

Dei Verbum speaks of this very beautifully in this sentence:

Now what was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the people 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.

Catholics do indeed believe in “Scripture and Tradition,” as it is said in describing the old Reformation controversy.

But Tradition is not a “second book,” accepted in addition to Sacred Scripture.

If that were the case, a Protestant argument one sometimes hears would be rather persuasive:

“Look, we believe in Scripture alone. You Catholics believe in Scripture + Tradition. But we both accept Scripture, so we should just take that as the common rule of faith for all Christians.”

“Tradition” is really the whole life of the Church, proceeding in continuity – in an unbroken progression – from the life of the Lord Jesus and Pentecost until now.

The books of Sacred Scripture were written within that Tradition. AND, it is within that Tradition that the individual books of the New Testament were judged to be authoritative witnesses to the original Revelation.

Again, words from *Dei Verbum*:

8. . . . 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 . . .

The books of the New Testament were written individually and circulated that way for centuries. They were read in the local Churches, but so were other texts.

In fact, the first records we have of all 27 books of the New Testament and only those 27 books (being recognized as authoritative) come from the late fourth century: a letter of St Athanasius in 367, and a decree from a council at Rome in the year 382.

Imagine that: that is a longer after the Resurrection than our lives are after the Revolutionary War. The Faith was preached and believed and lived for over 300 years before, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the contents of the New Testament were definitively settled.

So the Bible did not produce the Church. The individual books of the New Testament were written, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, within the ongoing life of the Church (within the Living Tradition); and likewise, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the identification of those books which should be included in the canon of the New Testament was made.

This point is made in popular Catholic apologetics by asking the question: “Alright, if you (my Protestant friend) believe in Scripture alone, how do you know which books rightly belong in Sacred Scripture?”

Our Catholic understanding that “Revelation Itself” was not the giving of a document; and that the document we have – Sacred Scripture – has come to us in the context of a larger “Tradition.”

The importance of these points becomes clearer when compared to the very different understanding that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has of their *Book of Mormon*.

You know, Mormons revere the *Book of Mormon* as having authority equal to that of Sacred Scripture.

Where does the *Book of Mormon* come from? According to Mormon belief, their founder, Joseph Smith, discovered golden tablets written in an unknown language (“reformed Egyptian”) in upstate New York in 1827. He found and translated these into English with the help of an angel named Moroni, whereupon the tablets themselves disappeared. The English “translation” is the *Book of Mormon*.

The *Book of Mormon* purports to record the words of ancient prophets in America and to tell the story of the Jesus coming to America shortly after His Resurrection. But there is no living memory of that whatsoever. There is no community descended from those who heard the “American prophets,” nor from those who met the Risen Jesus in America. All that is known, is known by virtue of a document, said to be miraculously given, which really stands on its own as “the revelation.”

So, for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the *Book of Mormon* is essentially a text that appeared from nowhere.

The difference between that and the reality of Sacred Scripture is clear. The New Testament was not miraculously given to us (long after the fact) as a record of things that would otherwise be completely unknown.

Christ’s words and deeds (as recorded in the New Testament) were committed to writing by those who had heard and seen the Lord in the flesh (or by persons taught by those who had seen and heard Him) – and the record was made relatively soon after those events took place.

Furthermore, those who knew the Lord personally were formed into a community that has continued to exist down to this day. That community preserves a memory of the events recorded in Sacred Scripture (for instance, in the liturgical year) and of things not specified in Scripture (for example, the specific places where these events occurred).

Now Protestants are not Mormons, but Protestants sometimes approach Sacred Scripture as if it were the *Book of Mormon*.

The classic Protestant principle is that the Christian Faith depends on “Scripture alone” (– the famous “*sola scriptura*” of Martin Luther). But some (especially fundamentalist) Protestants seem to understand this to mean that the Bible is itself Revelation; and that

they possess it as a sort of “free-standing” document that does not exist within a Tradition (– out of which it arose and in the light of which it must be understood).

This attitude is reflected in statements of belief in which the first article is “I believe in the Bible,” and then goes on to list the traditional articles of the Creed. For Catholics (following ancient practice, not in response to the Reformation), the Bible is mentioned only somewhat obliquely in the Creed.

And so, as *Dei Verbum* reasserts, the Church does look to both Scripture and Tradition – not as “two books” standing next to each other, but as part of one process by which Revelation has been transmitted to us.

Again, words of *Dei Verbum*:

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.

C. Magisterium

“Magisterium” is a word less familiar to us than “Scripture” or “Tradition.” It comes from the Latin word “magister,” which means “teacher.”

The Magisterium is described in *Dei Verbum* as, “*the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.*” (DV 10)

The reality of the Magisterium was already present in a passage of *Dei Verbum* cited above at the beginning of the section about Tradition:

7. Therefore Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men that Gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching, and to impart to them heavenly gifts.

The Magisterium – the teaching authority of the Apostles and their successors – was exercised from the very beginning within the life of the Church – within the living Tradition. This was one of the principal instruments the Holy Spirit has used to shape the living Tradition of the Church.

The Apostles were commissioned to be the authoritative preachers of the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ. From the beginning, the questions about what belief in Jesus entailed were settled by the authority of the Apostles.

The Scriptures were committed to writing by them or under their authority. And by their authority, the canon of Sacred Scripture was determined.

Even after the text of the New Testament is determined, without a living, authoritative voice, unity of faith cannot be maintained. Everyone has his and her own interpretation of the written text. Without unity of Faith, there is not One Church. And, as is very clear in the words of the Lord Jesus, His desire is that His disciples be one.

So this appreciation of Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium really makes clear our Catholic Identity. Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium have all been part of a single process by which our knowledge and understanding of the Revelation of God in Christ have been transmitted to us.

As *Dei Verbum* says,

10. . . . 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.

Conclusion: the Spirit of Vatican II

As in the first homily, I would like to conclude with a few words about the authentic spirit of Vatican II.

Again as in the first homily, one of the clearest ways to appreciate the spirit of Vatican II is to compare *Dei Verbum* to the equivalent Constitution produced by Vatican I, *Dei Filius*.

Here is what *Dei Filius* (of Vatican I) had to say about the importance of the Magisterium:

5. Everybody knows that those heresies, condemned by the fathers of Trent, which rejected the divine magisterium of the Church and allowed religious questions to be a matter for the judgment of each individual, have gradually collapsed into a multiplicity of sects, either at variance or in agreement with one another; and by this means a good many people have had all faith in Christ destroyed.

In that text of Vatican I, the Catholic position on the Magisterium is stated very vigorously, with a very brief argument made for the truth of the Catholic position from

the consequences of following the Protestant approach: Private interpretation of Scripture leads to innumerable sects, and eventually undermines faith in Christ altogether.

That was Vatican I.

Dei Verbum – of Vatican II – is certainly consistent with that point made by Vatican II. But *Dei Verbum* really offers a much fuller rationale for why Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium must be held together.

I really think the argument in *Dei Verbum* is really much stronger – it takes a longer view, and really helps us to see how Scripture arises within Tradition, and depends on the Magisterium.

BUT, although I think this argument is made very well in *Dei Verbum*, the logic in *Dei Verbum* is not really presented as an argument.

You could read *Dei Verbum* and never guess that there had been a Protestant Reformation. There is no direct reference to there being another approach to these questions – a Protestant approach. There is no controversy in *Dei Verbum*.

The structure is not: “We Catholics say this. Protestants say that, but it is not nearly as adequate to say that, because if you say that, all these logical inconsistencies and bad consequences follow.”

Dei Verbum doesn't start with – or even acknowledge – the old controversies of the Reformation. It just very serenely offers a comprehensive picture of how Scripture, Tradition, Magisterium have in fact be interrelated historically, and how they really need to be.

I think that gentle, non-confrontational spirit in the document was a very positive step in the life of the Church, and it was certainly an opening to improved relations with our “separated brethren.”

But a Catholic (in the 1960's) could read *Dei Verbum* in a kind of simpleminded way and say, “Well, we're not condemning the Protestants any more. I guess it doesn't make any difference any more whether one approaches things in a Catholic way or in a Protestant way.”

I don't think an honest reading of *Dei Verbum* allows that interpretation. And I think it is good to look at the arguments that are in the text of *Dei Verbum* and how they answer the old Reformation controversies. Doing that helps to confirm us in our Catholic Faith, and really to understand it better.