

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* III – RELIABILITY OF SCRIPTURE**

In the first two homilies (on the first two chapters of *Dei Verbum*), there was an attempt to put Sacred Scripture into context:

- (1) it is not “Revelation Itself” but a witness to Revelation, and
- (2) it must be held together with Tradition and Magisterium.

These points could be seen as de-emphasizing Scripture – relativizing its authority in a certain way.

It is certainly the intention of *Dei Verbum* to see Sacred Scripture in context. This is an answer to the Protestant tendency to make a “free-standing Bible” the only authority for the content of the faith (– or even to make the Bible itself the object of faith).

But the old controversy coming from the Reformation – Scripture as the sole authority (*sola Scriptura*) – is not the only issue *Dei Verbum* needed to address.

There was an even greater problem: a modern assault on the authority of Scripture, which had arisen from the nineteenth century, originally in Protestant circles.

I. The Modern Assault on Biblical Authority

A. Historical Background

The seeds of this crisis were sown in the humanism of the Renaissance (which began around 1400, and so was flourishing at the time of the Reformation itself). The Renaissance was marked by a great enthusiasm for the ancient world of Greece and Rome. There was great enthusiasm for classical art and architecture, and also for the study of the ancient languages and documents. All of this was good in itself.

But by the 18th century, the (so-called) Enlightenment brought a rationalistic and skeptical spirit to Western culture.

The Enlightenment continued to glorify the achievements of pagan antiquity, along with an boundless confidence in the modern scientific method.

Its aim was to reform society based on Reason (without revelation, faith or tradition) and to seek progress through scientific knowledge alone.

The spirit of the Enlightenment was very hostile to historic Christianity
– sometimes violently so (as in the French Revolution); sometimes in a way that sought to preserve ethical elements of Christianity (as the Deists or the Unitarians – who believed only in “the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of Man and the neighborhood of Boston.”)

B. The Developing Challenge to Biblical Authority

Biblical studies had always enjoyed a central importance in Protestant scholarship (– not surprising, since the Bible was the sole authoritative source for knowledge of God).

From the time of Luther – with his knowledge of the ancient Biblical languages, and his new translation of the Bible into German – there was enthusiasm for applying contemporary scholarship to the study of Scripture.

By the 19th century, important Protestant scholars were accommodating their work to the method and prejudices of the Enlightenment.

This tendency manifested itself in:

- (1) a desire to examine individual books of the Bible as historical documents, rather than treating the entirety as “the Word of God;”
- (2) a preference for the authority of science (“reason”) over that of Scripture (“faith”) where there seemed to be a conflict – leading to the notion that only parts of the Bible are inerrant, or that it is inerrant only in matters of faith and morals;
- (3) the desire to give a natural explanation to anything miraculous in Scripture.

It did not take long before these approaches led to conclusions that were no longer compatible with historic Christianity.

One of the founders of the so-called “Higher Criticism” was Friederich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Already in his *Leben Jesu (Life of Jesus)*, he posited that Jesus had not really died on the Cross, but his “resurrection” was a recovery; and what is described as the “ascension” was really his death.

In the Catholic Church, *Dei Filius* (1870) of Vatican I condemned this “de-mythologizing” of Sacred Scripture, primarily as a Protestant problem.

Indeed even the Holy Bible itself, which they [the Protestants] at one time claimed to be the sole source and judge of the Christian faith, is no longer held to be divine, but they begin to assimilate it to the inventions of myth. (Dei Filius, 6)

C. The Defense of Scriptural Authority in the Catholic Church

The influence of liberal trends in Protestantism was also felt in Catholic circles, but it was kept in check by the exercise of papal authority.

In his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), Pope Leo XIII tried in a rather careful way to defend the inspiration and inerrancy of Sacred Scripture, while at the same time acknowledging the legitimate authority of scientific knowledge.

18. In the second place, we have to contend against those who, making an evil use of physical science, minutely scrutinize the Sacred Book in order to detect the writers in a mistake, and to take occasion to vilify its contents. . . . Hence to the Professor of Sacred Scripture a knowledge of natural science will be of very great assistance in detecting such attacks on the Sacred Books, and in refuting them. There can never, indeed, be any real discrepancy between the theologian and the physicist, as long as each confines himself within his own lines, and both are careful, as St. Augustine warns us, "not to make rash assertions, or to assert what is not known as known." If dissension should arise between them, here is the rule also laid down by St. Augustine, for the theologian: "Whatever they can really demonstrate to be true of physical nature, we must show to be capable of reconciliation with our Scriptures; and whatever they assert in their treatises which is contrary to these Scriptures of ours, that is to Catholic faith, we must either prove it as well as we can to be entirely false, or at all events we must, without the smallest hesitation, believe it to be so." . . .

20. The principles here laid down will apply to cognate sciences, and especially to History. It is a lamentable fact that there are many who with great labor carry out and publish investigations on the monuments of antiquity, the manners and institutions of nations and other illustrative subjects, and whose chief purpose in all this is too often to find mistakes in the sacred writings and so to shake and weaken their authority. Some of these writers display not only extreme hostility, but the greatest unfairness; in their eyes a profane book or ancient document is accepted without hesitation, whilst the Scripture, if they only find in it a suspicion of error, is set down with the slightest possible discussion as quite untrustworthy. It is true, no doubt, that copyists have made mistakes in the text of the Bible; this question, when it arises, should be carefully considered on its merits, and the fact not too easily admitted, but only in those passages where the proof is clear. It may also happen that the sense of a passage remains ambiguous, and in this case good hermeneutical methods will greatly assist in clearing up the obscurity. But it is absolutely wrong and forbidden, either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of Holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred . . . [or to] concede that divine inspiration regards the things of faith and morals, and nothing beyond . . . For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical, are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Spirit; and so far is it from being possible that any error can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true. This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church, solemnly defined in the Councils of Florence and of Trent, and finally confirmed and more expressly formulated by the Council of the Vatican. . . .

Pope Pius X was even more forceful in his encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, "On the doctrines of the modernists" (1907). The Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) published a decree accompanying this encyclical, known as

Lamentabili Sane (also called “The Syllabus of Errors”), condemning specific rationalistic tendencies in Biblical interpretation (as well as errors in other doctrinal matters). Among the condemned propositions were:

9. They display excessive simplicity or ignorance who believe that God is really the author of the Sacred Scriptures.
11. Divine inspiration does not extend to all of Sacred Scriptures so that it renders its parts, each and every one, free from every error.
12. If he wishes to apply himself usefully to Biblical studies, the exegete must first put aside all preconceived opinions about the supernatural origin of Sacred Scripture and interpret it the same as any other merely human document.
14. In many narrations the Evangelists recorded, not so much things that are true, as things which, even though false, they judged to be more profitable for their readers.

[One important figure embroiled in these controversies within the Catholic Church was Fr. Alfred Loisy, a professor of Sacred Scripture. He was dismissed from his teaching position at the Institut Catholique (Paris) in 1893 and excommunicated in 1908. (Note the coincidence with the dates of the documents above.)

Loisy defended five theses which (perhaps with some nuance) would be accepted today, namely:

- the Pentateuch was not the work of Moses;
- the first five chapters of Genesis are not literal history;
- the New Testament and the Old Testament do not possess equal historical value;
- there has been a development in the religious doctrine in scripture;
- the sacred writings have the same limitations as all other ancient texts.

But trajectory of his principles also led him to write the following:

Christ has even less importance in my religion than he does in that of the liberal Protestants: for I attach little importance to the revelation of God the Father for which they honor Jesus. If I am anything in religion, it is more pantheist-positivist-humanitarian than Christian. (Mémoires 2)]

The intervention of Pius X was generally effective in defending the reliability of Sacred Scripture within the Catholic Church.

By the mid-20th century, Pope Pius XII returns to these questions in his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943). His intention is still to defend the authority of Sacred Scripture:

3. The first and greatest care of Leo XIII was to set forth the teaching on the truth of the Sacred Books and to defend it from attack. Hence with grave words did he proclaim that there is no error whatsoever if the sacred writer, speaking of things of the physical order "went by what sensibly appeared" as the Angelic Doctor says, speaking either "in figurative language, or in terms which were commonly used at the time, and which in many instances are in daily use at this day, even among the most eminent men of science." For "the sacred writers, or to speak more accurately - the words are St. Augustine's - the Holy Spirit, Who spoke by them, did not intend to teach men these things - that is the essential nature of the things of the universe - things in no way profitable to salvation"; which principle "will apply to cognate sciences, and especially to history . . . Nor is the sacred writer to be taxed with error, if "copyists have made mistakes in the text of the Bible," or, "if the real meaning of a passage remains ambiguous." Finally it is absolutely wrong and

forbidden "either to narrow inspiration to certain passages of Holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred," since divine inspiration "not only is essentially incompatible with error but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true. This is the ancient and constant faith of the Church."

Nevertheless, the tone of Pius XII is quite different than that of Pius X, as evidenced by the English title of this encyclical, "On Promoting Biblical Studies." See also the realistically positive tone of a passage such as this:

42. The progressive exploration of the antiquities of the East, mentioned above, the more accurate examination of the original text itself, the more extensive and exact knowledge of languages both biblical and oriental, have with the help of God, happily provided the solution of not a few of those questions, which in the time of Our Predecessor Leo XIII of immortal memory, were raised by critics outside or hostile to the Church against the authenticity, antiquity, integrity and historical value of the Sacred Books. For Catholic exegetes, by a right use of those same scientific arms, not infrequently abused by the adversaries, proposed such interpretations, which are in harmony with Catholic doctrine and the genuine current of tradition . . .

II. Three Points from the Teaching of *Dei Verbum* (Chapters 3-5)

Dei Verbum wants to hold together:

- (1) the authority of Sacred Scripture, based on having the Holy Spirit as its Divine Author, and
- (2) the contribution of human authors, whose mode of expression can be profitably researched and interpreted.

And, another point, related especially to the first chapters:

- (3) inasmuch as the Sacred Scripture is not "Revelation Itself" (*DV* 1-2), it may be seen as witnessing to a growing understanding of the truth.

A. Divine Authorship – Inspiration

Dei Verbum offers a very robust defense of the traditional belief that Sacred Scripture, in its entirety, is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

*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, 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. (*DV* 11)*

And all the books of Sacred Scripture are free of error.

. . . 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 writings for the sake of salvation. (DV 11)

Dei Verbum avoids the highly charged expression “limited inerrancy,” but does acknowledge that the goal of Sacred Scripture is not to instruct the human race concerning astronomy or physics. The importance of Sacred Scripture is that it teaches “the truths necessary for salvation,” as previously affirmed by Pope Pius XII.

Very importantly, in Chapter 5, *Dei Verbum* strongly affirms the historical reliability of the Gospels.

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
...

To a faithful, believing Catholic, this might seem too obvious to require mention. But the fact is that “critical studies” have become so skeptical as to be ludicrous.

Any word of Jesus that bears a resemblance to another text found in the ancient Near East is presumed to be borrowed from that source and put on to the lips of Jesus by the Evangelists.

Any word or action reflecting the divinity of Christ is assumed to be a later gloss added by those who wanted to make that claim for Him.

The way to make a name for oneself in the professional literature is to be ever more skeptical in regard to the words and actions recounted in the Gospels. This process approaches its terminus in the “Jesus Seminar,” a group which published a book (*The Five Gospels*, 1993) which proposed that only 18% of the words attributed to Jesus in the New Testament are authentic to Him.

So the first point of *Dei Verbum* is that all of Sacred Scripture is inspired by God; and it faithfully witnesses to the acts of God in the history of salvation.

B. Human Authorship and Interpretation

But *Dei Verbum* also asserts that the human authors of the books of Sacred Scripture were true authors, needing to reduce what they had seen and heard to written form.

In the Gospels, for example, there is really not sufficient material to fill a comprehensive account of three years of the words and actions of Jesus. There was clearly a selection of material preserved in writing.

The human authors were not stenographers, to whom the Holy Spirit dictated a text word-for-word.

The human authors made their selection from the available material, and placed the chosen elements into a smooth narrative based on their own perspective and intention.

So, for example, the Gospel of St Matthew is very interested in the fulfillment of the Old Testament, and is even seen by many as grouping the sermons of Jesus into five “books,” to represent the “new Pentateuch” given by Jesus as the New Moses. On the other hand, the Gospel of St. Luke takes great interest in the relatively few interactions that Jesus had with Gentiles.

But this, again, was done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit:

. . . In composing the sacred books, 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.

Since human authorship was at work in the writing of the books of Sacred Scripture, knowledge of literary forms, cultural conventions and historical background can help us understand the text better.

However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, 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. (DV 12)

But while a linguistic or historical analysis of a Scriptural text can be helpful in understanding it, the fundamental tools for interpretation are these:

(1) The best commentary on any passage of Sacred Scripture is the whole of Sacred Scripture – the part must always be understood in light of the whole.

But, 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. (DV 12)

(2) And both part and whole must be read in the context of the whole Tradition:

The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith. (DV 12)

(3) And the authoritative interpretation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture is the Magisterium:

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. (DV 12)

The thrust of all three points is the same:

While linguistic and historical studies may sometimes be helpful, the most important sources for interpretation are not “scientific” ones, but: the totality of Scripture, the totality of Tradition, the decision of the Magisterium.

C. The Progressive Work of the Holy Spirit

This last point is especially related to what we said last month about Scripture being a witness to Revelation.

1. The Old Testament

The Old Testament bears witness to a covenant between God and Israel in which Israel comes to know God and His ways better over time. It is clear, then, that not every word said in the Old Testament is final and definitive.

These books [of the Old Testament], though they also contain some things which are incomplete and temporary, nevertheless show us true divine pedagogy. (DV 15)

This does not mean that the Old Testament is defective, but rather that it is a true and accurate witness to a relationship in which Israel grows in its understanding.

This insight offers a solution to a number of moral problems that the Old Testament might seem to present. It explains, for example, why the polygamy of the Patriarchs is not normative for us. Monogamy was the plan of God from the beginning, but He did not demand it at first from the Patriarchs whose pagan ancestry made polygamy expected for them. By the time Jesus was born, there was no more polygamy among the Jews. God “brought Israel along” to that point.

Jesus Himself suggested this kind of solution in the Gospels when He said that Moses permitted divorce and regulated the writing of a decree of divorce “because of the hardness of your hearts, but in the beginning, it was not so.”

In fact, it is a very interesting that when God first makes a covenant with Abraham, He does not insist that Abraham disbelieve in the existence of many gods . . . only that he (Abraham) and his descendants worship only the Lord. At that early moment, God does not even break tell Abraham that all other gods are false gods. One can imagine that that would have been too much information for

someone who had known only a pagan world. There is, indeed, a “divine pedagogy” at work.

2. The New Testament

The New Testament preserves reliably what Jesus, the Word made flesh, said and did. He was the fullness of Truth – no further Revelation after Him.

But even here, there is a gradual pedagogy at work. All that Jesus said and did was understood better after Pentecost than before. And over time, in the life of the Church, they continued to be understood more profoundly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

. . . [A]fter 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 enjoyed after they had been instructed by the glorious events of Christ's life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth. This they did with that clearer understanding which they enjoyed after they had been instructed by the glorious events of Christ's life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth. (DV 19)

. . . For the Lord Jesus . . . sent them the advocate Spirit who would lead them into the fullness of truth (see John 16:13). (DV 20)

III. The Spirit of Vatican II

Divino Afflante Spiritu (1943) was already quite positive in its attitude toward the technical study of Sacred Scripture. Perhaps the tone of *Dei Verbum* is still more positive in that no cautions about the abuse of scholarship are explicitly stated – in keeping with the general approach in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

But there is no substantive difference between the two documents in their teaching:

- The inspiration of all the books of Sacred Scripture in their entirety is affirmed.
- There is the acknowledgment that the human authors were true authors, who used literary conventions of their time and who chose and arranged the material committed to writing . . . but it is affirmed that this was done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in a way that conveyed the honest truth of what was seen and heard, so as to impart the truth necessary for salvation that God wants us to know.
- The value of Biblical scholarship is affirmed, but made subject to the teaching authority of the Magisterium.

Having affirmed (1) the perennial value of Sacred Scripture
and (2) the relative value of historical and linguistic Scriptural studies,

Dei Verbum will still want to describe the role that the Scriptures should have in the life of the Church. That is the subject of the last chapter of *Dei Verbum*, and we will talk about that next week.

This reflects so strongly the orientation of the Second Vatican Council:
it was not called primarily to combat error;
but to provide new pastoral initiatives in the life of the Church.