

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

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

This Year of Faith occurs on the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. The Year of Faith commemorates that Council, and comes with an invitation to revisit the documents produced by Vatican II so we may better understand the authentic teaching of that Council and put it into practice.

THE DOCUMENTS OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) produced sixteen documents. The most important of them were the four “Constitutions” – the other documents are called “Decrees” and “Declarations.”

The Constitutions contain the most important teaching of the Council because they treat subjects central to the life and mission of the Church. Other documents (Decrees and Declarations) treat specialized questions (such as the Eastern Rite Churches, priestly training, Christian education).

Of the four Constitutions, two are on the Church (one on her nature, and one on her mission in the modern world), one is on the liturgy, and one is on revelation.

We are going to discuss all the Constitutions – not in the order they were published, but in a “logical order” –

1. The Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) – the first thing that happens in the story of salvation is that God makes Himself known – finally and fully in the Person of His Son.
2. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) – We must first know what the Church is in herself before we talk about her mission or her liturgical life.
3. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) – This logically follows the reflection on the essential and unchanging nature of the Church.

4. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sancrosanctum Concilium*) – The source and summit of the Church’s life, in which she fulfills her nature and from which she draws strength for her mission to the world.

Next summer, we will also be looking (more briefly) at three of the other documents.

CONSTITUTION ON DIVINE REVELATION (*DEI VERBUM*)

***DEI VERBUM* I – REVELATION AND FAITH**

A. Everything begins with God’s Self-Revelation

The title of this document and the first subject it treats is: Divine Revelation.

This gives us the first important point to take from the document: the initiative is with God.

My faith, the life of the Church, *everything* begins with God, who first acts to make Himself known.

This God who takes this initiative is real, personal, free, and loving toward us.

Chapter 1 of *Dei Verbum*, on “Revelation Itself,” begins:
In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will . . . (DV 2)

The life of faith, the life of the Church . . . does not begin with us doing something. It all begins with God who first makes Himself known to us.

He does that:

initially in creation,
then in the call of Abraham and the covenant He initiates and sustains
with the children of Israel,
and finally and completely in the Person of His Divine Son.

This is a very serious point. It’s precisely on this point that the world goes wrong.

The first and most serious difficulty that the secularized West faces is loss of the belief that there is a real and personal God, who chooses to act.

In our time, an appeal to science is often invoked as the basis for rejecting the supernatural.

Even those who profess faith are tempted to drift toward a “Unitarian” or “New Age” understanding –

- God is the sum of the life-energy in the universe (and not personal);
- Christian Faith gives witness to universal human values (and its unique aspects are non-essential).

Cover story of current *Newsweek* is entitled: “Heaven is Real – A Doctor’s Experience of the Afterlife.”

Excerpts from forthcoming book *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife* by Eben Alexander, a book being published later this month.

Dr. Alexander was a neurosurgeon teaching in the medical school at Harvard University. He was nominally Christian, not devout.

He was extremely skeptical of near-death experiences. His belief was that consciousness is a product of the cortex of our brains. He reasoned that since that cortex is very delicate, a lack of oxygen could generate all kinds of false perceptions – and that’s how he explained near-death experiences.

In 2008, Dr. Alexander contracted meningitis that was nearly fatal. He was in a coma for seven days, under very close medical observation. His higher order brain functions were completely shut down.

As Dr. Alexander himself says:

“My near-death experience . . . took place not while my cortex was malfunctioning, but while it was simply off. There is absolutely no way that I could have experienced even a dim and limited consciousness during my time in the coma . . . much less the hyper-vivid and completely coherent odyssey I underwent.”

Dr. Alexander had an experience of heaven. He saw many beings whom we would certainly call angels. He does not say that he saw God.

But he does say that he saw “a beautiful woman with high cheekbones, deep-blue eyes, and golden brown tresses, riding on the wings of millions of butterflies” who gave him a speechless message, “You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever . . . you have nothing to fear.” (Wonder who that could have been!)

Dr. Alexander's previous belief that we are nothing but bodies and brains has been completely overturned.

So far as I know, the Freedom from Religion Foundation did not close its doors the day that issue of *Newsweek* hit the stands. Those who are personally invested in disbelieving will always find a way to deny the truth.

But it is providential that this story appears now. Testimony like this – from a person of science who was formerly very skeptical – is especially powerful in our time.

Testimony like this confirms the starting point of *Dei Verbum* – that the whole saga of faith begins with the initiative of a living God, who is real and personal.

B. Faith is the response to Revelation

The second point is closely related to the first: Faith is a response to the initiative that God takes in revealing Himself.

Faith is not a human product, but is a response to God who has acted first.

This is an important correction to another contemporary attitude – that “my faith” is something that I construct. In this view, “my faith” is the result of my surveying all religious opinions and ethical systems so that I can choose for myself that combination of ideas and values that seems most plausible or helpful.

This is also the attitude behind the phrase one sometimes hears, “spiritual but not religious.” The implication is the “spiritual” (but not religious) person is the one who is really thinking about things sincerely and is not (“slavishly”!) subject to any rigid religious system.

When a Christian says “faith,” we do not mean “the sum total of my opinions on spiritual and ethical matters.” Faith is my “yes” to what God reveals.

The fundamental mistake in that contemporary attitude (described above) is that the priority of God and His action is forgotten. I do not construct “my faith.” Faith is an assent to God who has revealed Himself.

What does the response of faith, the “yes” of faith look like?

Dei Verbum describes it like this:

The obedience of faith 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 and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him. (DV 5, quoting Dei Filius, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith from Vatican I)

Faith is an “obedience.” It is a willing trust in God that makes me ready and eager to believe and do all that He tells me.

Faith is all about “assent” . . . and so it is necessarily incompatible with “dissent.”

Contrary to the popular notion that the Second Vatican Council legitimized or even encouraged dissent among Catholics, note the very strong language above: “*offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him.*”

We will return to this question when we look at the “Declaration on Religious Freedom” next summer.

C. The depiction of the dynamic at work in revelation and faith given in *Dei Verbum* is highly personal and relational, described in terms that are warm and loving.

1. First, the description of God’s self-revelation is given in warm and personal language:

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself . . . (DV 2, as we have already seen)

Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them . . . [in the Person of Christ, of course] (DV2)

And later (in #21), *Dei Verbum* says that, in Sacred Scripture, “*the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them.*”

2. Likewise, the response of faith is described in similar terms.

As God takes the initiative to reveal Himself because of His love, so the response of faith is also one of love.

As already quoted above, *DV* describes the response of faith by saying, “*Man commits his whole self freely to God.*”

Faith is the act by which we entrust ourselves to God with full confidence (that He can be believed, and He will take care of us).

Or even, we might say, faith is the acceptance of God’s gift of Himself to us – the act by which we answer with love the love He has first offered us.

3. Finally, the goal of God’s initiative and our response (revelation and faith) is described in *Dei Verbum* a highly personal way.

As we have already seen, that first sentence of *DV2* begins by pointing to God’s initiative:

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will . . .

It goes on to describe what God’s Will is – what the final purpose of He has in making Himself known to us. It is all so that . . .

. . . man might [through Christ and in the Holy Spirit] have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature.

The goal of God’s self-disclosure and our faith is communion with God – living with Him and sharing His nature.

This is critically important for our understanding of the salvation that our Christian faith promises.

Heaven and hell are not a Christian version of a generic life-after-death “karma” – those who did good are rewarded; those who did evil are punished. (Christianity is not just “one more way of saying that.”)

Heaven is not the Moslem vision of sensual pleasure that lasts eternally.

Heaven is not what might be depicted by Hallmark: sitting on a cloud in a white gown, listening to harp music forever (– actually, the Moslem version sounds somewhat more interesting than that!).

The goal of the true faith is communion with God. Heaven is nothing less than gaining access to the life of God Himself: being taken into the Family

of God the Holy Trinity, loving and being loved by the True God for all eternity.

“[God] chose to share with [us] those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind.” (DV 6, following St. Ambrose)

That is a reality beyond our imagination. As St. Paul says: *Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned upon man what God has prepared for those who love Him.*

[This is entirely in accord with today’s Gospel. For man, achieving his own salvation is impossible, but not for God; for God, all things are possible.]

And in light of this understanding of salvation – heaven, it is perfectly clear why Jesus Christ is the only Way to heaven:

He has belonged to “the Family” of the Holy Trinity from the beginning – it is only because He who “belongs there” has come to offer us union with Himself that we can have access to that Divine Communion.

If heaven and hell are only a Christian way to say that there is “karma in eternity,” then the belief that Jesus is the indispensable Way to salvation makes little sense.

Conclusion: Hermeneutic of Continuity, not Rupture

In conclusion a few words on the issue of the “hermeneutic of continuity.”

Pope Benedict uses this phrase to make the point that the Second Vatican Council did not invent a new religion in the 1960’s.

The teaching of the Council is in continuity with the prior twenty ecumenical councils, and all the teaching of the Church.

So, likewise, what is said about Revelation and faith in *Dei Verbum* is entirely in continuity with prior Catholic teaching on these issues.

My “October surprise” –

There was an earlier Dogmatic Constitution that treated many of these same issues.

It was a constitution of the First Vatican Council, published in 1870, entitled *Dei Filius*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith.

The continuity of these two documents is clear:

1. Like *Dei Verbum*, *Dei Filius* had acknowledged the primacy of Revelation, to which faith is our response.

In *Deus Filius*:

Chapter 1 – On God The Creator of All Things

Chapter 2 – On Revelation

(separating Natural Revelation and Divine Revelation)

Chapter 3 – On Faith

But there is a small difference: Vatican I described the whole constitution as “On the Catholic Faith,” whereas the emphasis on God’s action is even stronger in Vatican II, which calls its constitution “On Divine Revelation.”

2. When *Dei Verbum* described the response of faith as “offering the full submission of intellect and will,” it is repeating verbatim a formula of Vatican I – that formula is put into quotation marks and footnoted in the text of *Dei Verbum*.

Vatican II is in full accord with Vatican I that faith is all about assent, not dissent.

In *Dei Verbum*, there is no basis for saying that Vatican II encouraged or even tolerated dissent.

There is complete continuity with Vatican I.

But . . . the Second Vatican Council did not simply xerox *Dei Filius* . . .

3. *Dei Verbum*’s personal and relational description of Revelation and Faith is markedly different in tone from *Dei Filius* of Vatican I.

The description of faith in *Dei Filius* is almost exclusively concerned with faith as the assent to propositions (and reasons we can see for finding those propositions credible).

I think it is fair to say that the attitude of Vatican I is something like this: since the sovereign God has been so kind as to make Himself known to us, it is our duty to assent to what He says.

It would *not* be fair to say that *Dei Verbum*'s appreciation of faith as a trusting response to God's loving initiative is not entirely new:

The same Vatican I passage that contains that strong formula "offering the full submission of intellect and will" also says that the person who responds with faith "commits his whole self freely to God."

So the notion that faith engages me in a relationship with God is not foreign to *Dei Filius* of Vatican I.

But the notion of faith as assent to propositions is much stronger in Vatican I.

In the Second Vatican Council, the focus is on faith as a loving response to God's loving initiative which, yes, involves trusting Him entirely by giving full assent to all that He reveals.

Dei Verbum is entirely in continuity with *Dei Filius* of Vatican I, but it brings a new emphasis that God's Revelation of Himself and our response in faith are deeply relational, personal and full of love.