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—David Sim, Australian Catholic University

SAMPLE

# Reading the New Testament in the Church

A Primer for Pastors,  
Religious Educators, and Believers

*Francis J. Moloney, SDB*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Moloney, Francis J.

Reading the New Testament in the church : a primer for pastors, religious educators, and  
believers / Francis J. Moloney, SDB.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-4980-4 (pbk.)

1. Bible. New Testament—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Catholic Church—Doctrines.

I. Title.

BS2361.3.M66 2015

225.6'1—dc23

2014038725

*Nihil Obstat*: Reverend Peter J. Kenny, STD  
Diocesan Censor

*Imprimatur*: Monsignor Greg Bennet  
Vicar General

Date: July 28, 2014

The *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur* are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur* agree with the contents, opinions, or statements expressed. They do not necessarily signify that the work is approved as a basic text for catechetical instruction.

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The relationship of Church, Scripture and scriptural interpretation has suddenly become a burning question in many circles. In my view we ought to be glad that an important theological theme of this kind is no longer the preserve of academic interests but has been taken up by local congregations.

—Ernst Käsemann, March 12, 1962

For my fellow Salesians, pastors,  
religious educators, and believers  
at Don Bosco Hall,  
Berkeley, California, USA,  
and Don Bosco House,  
Clifton Hill, Victoria, Australia

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# Contents

Preface ix

1. Catholic and Critical:  
*The Challenge of Scripture in the Catholic Tradition* 1
2. Historical Context:  
*The New Testament World and Our World* 22
3. The Origins of the New Testament:  
*Its Creation and Reception* 45
4. Jesus of Nazareth:  
*A Biographical Sketch* 64
5. Paul:  
*The First Christian Author* 91
6. The Four Gospels:  
*Stories of Jesus* 113
7. The Acts of the Apostles:  
*Telling God's Story to the End of the Earth* 140
8. Later Writings of the New Testament:  
*Letters from Apostles and a Homily* 155
9. The Revelation to John:  
*Apocalypse Now* 180

Epilogue 191

Bibliography 202

Index of Subjects 215

Index of Authors 217

Index of Scripture and Other Ancient Sources 219

SAMPLE



# Preface

First encounters can be fascinating. We like to know the ethnic and geographical origins of others, and we are interested in their occupations in life. I was born and bred in Australia. These origins are a good start. Many regard my far-flung homeland as a paradise, marked by a free and easy lifestyle, a sound economy, and a stable (if at times stormy) parliamentary government. Problems arise when a second question is asked: What do you do? My first response is that I am a Catholic priest, a member of a religious congregation. In today's increasingly secularized world, this can be something of a conversation stopper, but once people have this information, they generally ask which parish I serve.

However, my life and ministry have not been in a parish or a diocese. I have worked in education, and largely tertiary education, all my adult life. I am simultaneously a Catholic priest and a university professor. This information leads to a final question: What do you teach? My specialization is the Bible, with a particular interest and expertise in the more recent part of the Bible that was produced by the early Christian church in the second half of the first Christian century. It is generally known as the New Testament. In Australia, where universities with religious studies departments are rare, an academic career specializing in the New Testament is something of an anomaly. Most educated people are aware of the literary world with its many languages, literatures, numerous "classics" in different forms (poetry, narrative, critical essays, travel narratives, biographies, and so forth). Some are also aware of a solid body of critical theory that is used in assessing and appreciating these traditions. The discipline of biblical studies belongs to that area of academic interest. However, most biblical scholars, especially

those who are ordained ministers in a Christian tradition, bring to their world and work a level of faith and commitment to Christianity. The interface between our professional careers and our day-to-day lives as believing Christians can become a problem.

My long experience as a priest, a religious, a teacher, and a published author tells me that there is still a need to build bridges between, on the one hand, those of us who devote our lives to the interpretation of the New Testament within the church and, on the other, the life of the church itself. The problem is not found so much in the situation described above—that is, the lack of awareness of thinking, teaching, and writing about the Bible. It runs deeper and is widespread, even in those places, such as the United States and Europe, where the study of the Bible and religions has long been part of university curricula. In most parts of the world, across all Christian traditions, tensions exist between ecclesial communities and biblical scholars. At worst, the suggestions of scholars are not trusted; they are regarded as a threat to the faith of believers. More common, however, is the lack of interest in what a small group of specialists are doing in their professional playpens, with their Hebrew, Greek, literary, and theological concerns. Pastors, religious educators, believers, and even theologians suffer from these tensions. It would be a blessing for all concerned if they could be eased.

No single contemporary figure better highlights this problem among Catholics than the prestigious German theologian Joseph Ratzinger, the retired Pope Benedict XVI. Professor Ratzinger was a leading expert at the Second Vatican Council. He had a special interest (and role) in the eventual proclamation of the groundbreaking document on Revelation from the council (*Dei Verbum*) in 1965.<sup>1</sup> In major contributions to a multivolume commentary on the conciliar documents, while still professor of systematic theology in the Catholic Faculty at the University of Tübingen, he wrote expertly of the relationship between the critical study of the Bible and the teaching authority of the Church. Commenting upon *Dei Verbum*, he wrote of the rich contribution of Vatican II to the relationship between Scripture and Tradition in paragraph 9:

We shall have to acknowledge the truth of the criticism that there is, in fact, no explicit mention of the possibility of a distorting tradition and the place of Scripture as an element in the Church that is *also* critical of tradition, which means that a most important side of the problem of tradition, as shown by the history of the church—and perhaps the real crux of the *ecclesia semper*

1. All references and citations from the documents of the Second Vatican Council are taken from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations; A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language* (Northport, NY: Costello, 1995).

*reformanda* [“the church . . . always in need of being purified” (*Lumen Gentium* 8)]—has been overlooked. In particular a council that saw itself consciously as a council of reform and thus implicitly acknowledged the possibility and reality of distortion in tradition could have achieved here in its thinking a real achievement in theological examination, both of itself and of its own purpose. That this opportunity has been missed can only be regarded as an unfortunate omission.<sup>2</sup>

In a later reflection on *Dei Verbum* (DV), dedicated to the role of Scripture in the life of the Church, Ratzinger adds further food for thought: “A reference to the ecclesial nature of exegesis, on the one hand, and to its methodological correctness on the other [see DV 12], again expresses the inner tension of church exegesis, which can no longer be removed, *but must simply be accepted as tension*.”<sup>3</sup> These are fundamental and encouraging principles that should guide the work of the interpreter of the Word of God in the service of the Church. But the excitement and encouragement ushered in by Vatican II has waned, and many Catholic scholars, who hesitated a long time before joining the tradition of a critical approach exercised by many other Christian biblical scholars, find themselves in a period of lack of confidence, and even trust, in their service to the Church. Joseph Ratzinger’s hope, in 1967, that this could serve as a life-giving tension within the Church needs to be restored.

Joseph Ratzinger’s passion for the role of the Word of God in the life of the Christian Church remained vibrant as he exercised his papal ministry. This was especially evident in his exhortation on the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church that followed the Episcopal Synod of 2009, *Verbum Domini*.<sup>4</sup> However, it is also evident in his three-volume work on Jesus of Nazareth. Benedict XVI stated unequivocally that his voice was only one among many, and he did not wish to create the impression that his understanding of Jesus was the only one possible.<sup>5</sup>

The three volumes contain much that is helpful, and it is encouraging to see the Pope using critical scholarship, even though most of it is somewhat

2. Joseph Ratzinger, “The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (London: Burns & Oates/Herder & Herder, 1969), 3:192–93.

3. Joseph Ratzinger, “Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 3:268. Emphasis added.

4. Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini: The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (Rome: Editrice Vaticana, 2010). For a commentary on this papal document, see James Chukwuma Okoye, *Scripture in the Church: The Synod on the Word of God and the Post-Synodal Exhortation Verbum Domini* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 127–79.

5. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 3 vols. (New York/San Francisco: Doubleday/Image/Ignatius Press, 2007–12); here I refer to 1:xxiii–xxvi.

dated (reflecting his own time as a professional academic) or limited to a certain section of German scholarship (indicating his lack of time and space to conduct full-scale research). A careful reader senses Benedict's personal discomfort with critical biblical scholarship. He accepts the necessity of the historical-critical method but regards it as limited and suggests that there is not much more that it can offer. He claims that it no longer produces an "image" (*Gestalt*) of Jesus that nourishes the lives of the faithful.<sup>6</sup> His claim to be producing a study "to portray the Jesus of the Gospels as the real, 'historical' Jesus in the strict sense of the word" disappoints many who have a more critical, yet faith-filled, understanding of the Gospel texts analyzed by the Holy Father.<sup>7</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI writes to "be helpful to all believers who seek to encounter Jesus and to believe in him" and "to make possible a personal relationship with Jesus."<sup>8</sup> The Gospels are documents that come to us in a foreign language and were produced almost two thousand years ago. These two factors alone (an ancient language and a different time and culture) call for some critical skills. We, as Christian New Testament scholars who turn to the Gospels as part of a Christian revelation of the Word of God, wish to use our skills "to be helpful to all believers" and "to make possible a personal relationship with Jesus." The mission of the Christian New Testament scholar is to bridge the cultural, religious, and chronological gap that inevitably blocks direct access to the New Testament. This calls for the use of critical New Testament scholarship, on the one hand, and for a loyal articulation of one's Christian tradition, on the other. Ernst Käsemann, cited in the epigraph to this book, is a classic example of a passionate Lutheran scholar who recognizes that his service to his church as a New Testament scholar must follow the path of Martin Luther, for whom the Bible was "essentially an emergency aid, precisely because, in his view, God's Word is not susceptible of being confined in a book."<sup>9</sup> This has long been central to the Catholic Tradition, with its strong understanding of the role of Tradition as part of the Word of God, but most Protestant churches are also deeply concerned about the interpretation of the Bible within their tradition.

The study that follows attempts to open more widely the door that gives access to the New Testament, interpreted within the Christian and Catholic

6. See Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1:xi–xiv; 2:xiii–xvii.

7. See Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1:xxii.

8. See Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 2:xvii, xvi.

9. Ernst Käsemann, "Thoughts on the Present Controversy about Scriptural Interpretation," in *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 274. The quotation in the epigraph of this book comes from p. 260 of Käsemann's essay.

Tradition. It is a faith-directed yet critical introduction to a reading of the New Testament in the Church, respecting the influence and limitations of the world that produced it, insisting that “just as the life of the Church grows through persistent participation in the Eucharistic mystery, so we may hope for a new surge of spiritual vitality from intensified veneration for God’s word, which ‘lasts forever’ (Isa. 40:8; cf. 1 Pet. 1:23–25)” (DV 26).

This cannot be done without coming to grips with some fundamental elements that define the nature of the literature of the New Testament and the principles of interpretation that must come into play in reading this ancient document in our contemporary world. Only thus can we hope to acquire a creative and nourishing understanding of the New Testament that can then flow into and enrich our service of the Church and its faithful in our roles as pastors, religious educators, and theologians. Every book in the New Testament, from the simplest to the most complex, was born of passionate commitment to what God has done for us in and through Jesus Christ and was written to communicate and share that belief. This book attempts to capture that passionate communication of faith, hope, and love.

Like Benedict XVI, I have written the book that follows “to be helpful to all believers” and “to make possible a personal relationship with Jesus,” as a Catholic response to Benedict’s apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, especially paragraphs 29–49, “The Interpretation of Sacred Scripture in the Church.”<sup>10</sup> It is dedicated to the two communities of my religious congregation that housed and cared for me as I wrote it, one in Berkeley, California, and the other in Clifton Hill, Victoria, Australia. May we maintain and strengthen our commitment to live and proclaim the Word of God.

I express my gratitude to James Ernest, whose long-standing familiarity with my work on New Testament texts led him to suggest and supportively direct this more “hands-on” primer, raising the urgent question of how to read the New Testament in today’s Church. To my objection that my main interest is not hermeneutics but texts, James responded, “Yes, but you know what you are doing when you work with texts. This is what you should share.” I hope I have done so. I was privileged to have PHEME PERKINS, an outstanding scholar from the Catholic tradition, read the entire manuscript in its original draft. Her scholarly acumen and awareness of what is both needed and useful for

10. See para. 45, “Dialogue between Pastors, Theologians and Exegetes.” It closes: “Using appropriate techniques they should together set about examining and explaining the sacred texts in such a way that as many as possible of those who are ministers of God’s Word may be able to dispense fruitfully the nourishment of the Scriptures to the people of God. This nourishment enlightens the mind, strengthens the will and fires the hearts of men and women with the love of God.” On this section of the Pope’s exhortation, see Okoye, *Scripture in the Church*, 147–57.

its proposed audience have made it a much better book. Author and readers are in her debt. I am also grateful to my editor, Tim West, whose careful attention to my writing has resulted in a quality production, as we have come to expect from the house of Baker Academic.

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# Catholic and Critical

## *The Challenge of Scripture in the Catholic Tradition*

The Bible is known “by name.” It can be seen in bookshops, in hotel rooms, at church services. Indeed, the Bible remains the best-selling book in the world. It contains passages that have become part of everyday use in English. Proverbial sayings such as “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (see Luke 6:31), “go the extra mile” (see Matt. 5:41), “wash your hands” of something (see Pilate’s action in Matt. 27:24), “eat, drink, and be merry” (see Luke 12:19), “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (see Acts 20:35), and “the powers that be” (see Rom. 13:1) are a tiny sample of the many well-known phrases that have their origins in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Some will be familiar with a “family Bible,” in which all the births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths have been recorded for several generations.

But once the book is opened and read, difficulties emerge. The language is archaic, and the world from which the various stories come is distant from

1. On how the Bible (especially the King James Version of 1611) has shaped English language and literature, see Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982). Harold Bloom, *The Shadow of a Great Rock: A Literary Appreciation of the King James Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), is less positive.

the one we inhabit. The experience becomes more critical when we seek answers to pressing contemporary issues in the pages of the Bible. It is helpful to know that one of the greatest figures from the Christian tradition, the young Augustine, found that the Bible “seemed to me unworthy in comparison with Cicero. My inflated conceit shunned the Bible’s restraint, and my gaze never penetrated to its inwardness.”<sup>2</sup> This “inwardness” is one of the reasons the Church regards the Bible as its Sacred Scripture.

## Reading the Bible

The Bible is not *a book*. It is a collection of many books, starting from the book of Genesis on its first page and ending with the Apocalypse, or Revelation, on its last. The origin of the English word “bible” is a Greek word, *biblia*. It is a plural word that simply means “books.” The *biblia* (Bible) is not *a book* but a *collection* of books. The older section of the Bible, most of which was established as the Sacred Scripture of Israel before the time of Jesus of Nazareth, is traditionally called “the Old Testament.”<sup>3</sup> This name is sometimes challenged today, as calling the Christian Sacred Scriptures “the New Testament” can generate a distinction between what is old (and therefore outdated) and what is new (demanding more of our attention). Sometimes the names “First and Second Testament” or “the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures” are used to avoid the danger of that possible distinction. But that is not necessarily the case, and these alternatives also generate difficulties. For example, parts of the “Hebrew Bible” are in Aramaic, and the Greek version of the Hebrew, called the Septuagint (LXX), was for the majority of New Testament authors the text used as Scripture, and this continued to be the case in the early Church’s use of “the Bible.” In this book I will continue to use the traditional terminology, as the Old Testament is the older of the two testaments. This does not make it any less important. Indeed, it is impossible to understand Jesus, early Christianity, and the New Testament unless we see both Old and New Testament as one divinely revealed Word of God. They are both “testament,” a precious “gift,” and one is older than the other.<sup>4</sup>

2. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 6.10 (p. 40).

3. It is not clear when the whole of the Old Testament as we know it was regarded by the Jews as Sacred Scripture, but the process was nearing completion in the first Christian century.

4. On this, see the wise remarks of Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 188–89.



Within these “books” we find stories that look like narrative *history*. Some texts in the Old Testament are called “the historical books.” This expression is applied especially, but not only, to the two books of Samuel and the two books of Kings. There are also books in the New Testament that look like narrative *history*: the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and the Acts of the Apostles tell the story of Jesus’ birth, his life and teaching, his death and resurrection (Gospels), and the subsequent spread of the Christian community from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts). They look like “history books” to a reader living in the third Christian millennium, and most churchgoers understand them as such. But these impressions can be deceiving. There is also a great deal of poetry in the Old Testament, especially, but not only, in the book of Psalms. Poetry is also found in the New Testament. Two well-known “poems,” most likely early Christian hymns, can be found in the Prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:1–18) and Paul’s Letter to the Philippians (Phil. 2:5–11), the latter of which describes Jesus’ descent from equality with God, through death on a cross, to an ascent into exaltation at the right hand of God, where every knee will bow at his name. There are other such “hymns” scattered across the New Testament, especially in the Apocalypse.

The prophets wrote oracles that accuse, cajole, encourage, condemn, and punish. There is also a lot of “teaching” in the Old Testament, including in the great law books of Israel—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—and in the Prophets and books that come from what we call the Wisdom tradition—Ben Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus and found only in Catholic Bibles), Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes in Protestant Bibles), the book of Wisdom of Solomon (also only found in Catholic Bibles), and Proverbs. There is even a very beautiful love song, the Canticle of Canticles (also called Song of Songs or Song of Solomon), that affirms the beauty and importance of sexual love in an interpretation that runs side by side with a long Catholic tradition that this song is about the soul’s desire for union with God. A challenging form of literature called “apocalyptic” also appears from time to time, especially in the book of Daniel. It seeks to explain current suffering and the apparent lack of any possible human resolution of that suffering as part of God’s design, pointing to God’s intervention as the Lord of all history.

The same variety is found in the New Testament. Paul’s letters contain the earliest written “teaching” of the Christian Church. But in these letters, side by side with letters from other figures from the early Church, one can also find accusing oracles, cajoling, condemnation, and the threat of punishment. One can also find indications of affection and close fellowship. The teaching tradition continues in the practice of writing theological tracts (Letter to the

Hebrews). The practice of apocalyptic writing brings the New Testament and the Bible to an end (the Apocalypse).

These many “books” come from very different times; have their own historical, religious, and social background; and were written to address different issues across those centuries. The oldest of the literary traditions in the Old Testament probably reaches back to about 1000 BCE (Before the Common Era). Although we can only speculate about dates, about the antiquity of the traditions, and about whether they came from family or tribal origins, these ancient traditions may have had their origins in a very ancient culture that told its “stories” in familiar family and tribal settings, and these stories were eventually committed to writing. From that earliest period, almost every period of Israel’s history until 165–70 BCE (the book of Daniel) is represented by a book or section of a book in the Old Testament.

The time span behind the New Testament is much briefer. We cannot be certain, but Jesus of Nazareth lived from about 4 BCE until the early 30s of the Common Era (CE). The earliest subsequent document that we have (Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians) was written about 50 CE. The most recent of the Gospels probably appeared about 100 CE (John), but later documents that continued the Pauline traditions appeared early in the second Christian century (1–2 Timothy, Titus). While the Old Testament reflects almost one thousand years of Israel’s history and response to God’s initiative, the New Testament appeared across less than one hundred years. In itself this says something about the explosive nature of the story of Jesus of Nazareth’s life, teaching, death, and resurrection and the subsequent emergence of a powerful group of believers who wanted to tell that story and reflect upon its meaning. But it does not take away from the majesty of a national story of a God-chosen people and the record of its problematic relationship with its God across a thousand years, found in the pages of the Old Testament. One of the reasons the early Christians began to think of a “Sacred Scripture” associated with the life, death, resurrection, and subsequent heritage of Jesus was that they already accepted the Old Testament, the Sacred Scripture of Israel, as part of their heritage. The New Testament continued that heritage in the light of the event of Jesus Christ.

The variety of types of literature and the great span of historical and socio-religious settings within which the books of the New Testament were eventually produced are significant challenges to any interpreter. Added to these is the fact that all the books were written in a popular late form of Greek known as *koinē*. As outsiders looking into the world of Greek-speaking authors, we will always be limited in what we can catch of the original sense of those foreign words, even if we know some Greek.

## Necessary or Not?

Week by week we listen to biblical texts read in church services. Bible-study groups and prayer groups that rely on the Bible as the Word of God for their inspiration and guidance are found all over the world. Some Catholics claim that one only needs to hear *what they think* the Pope, bishops, and priests have to say.<sup>5</sup> They claim that there is no need for the interpretation of the New Testament in the Church. It is irrelevant at best or damaging to the Christian and Catholic Church at worst. Another approach to reading the New Testament is “fundamentalism.” These believers claim that no “mediation” is required between the Word of God articulated in the biblical text and the reader or hearer of that text. All one needs to do is hear or read the biblical Word proclaimed or read in an English translation. This must be taken as an infallible Word of God. Rigid groups found across all Christian confessions follow this interpretative practice. They run the danger of yielding to fanaticism and often lack tolerance of any point of view other than their own. This approach to the Word of God and to others is hard to accept within a more universal understanding of Jesus Christ and those who follow him.

Nevertheless, Catholic interpretation wears its presuppositions on its sleeve. It is part of an interpretative tradition that has gone on for almost two thousand years. God’s word is available to us in other places, not only in the holy book of the Bible. It must be so, as no book can hope to contain all that God has made known in the past, continues to communicate today, and will reveal in the future. Interpreting the New Testament in the Church calls for openness to the guidance provided to the interpreter by the Tradition to which she or he belongs. This process is not a restrictive imposition or a loss of academic freedom. It often proves to be a way into unexpected and exciting developments of the Tradition itself.

## Catholics and the Bible: A Brief History

### *Beginnings*

Prior to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the Christian Church, although divided within itself among Eastern churches and thus

5. The indication that some Catholics follow “what they think” various Church authorities are saying reflects a further step in the process of interpretation. Quite complex issues are faced by Church leadership, and those listening to their decisions listen with their prejudices and prior judgments in place. It is impossible not to do so. It is true of reading the Bible and also true for an understanding of Church teaching.

not without its sinfulness, always regarded the Gospels and the Epistles as the “apostolic preaching,” the foundation of Christian faith. In the earliest Church the authors of the New Testament books looked back to the Old Testament as their Scripture, as they began to articulate what the God of Israel had done for humankind through the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the time of the so-called apostolic fathers, Christian authors continued to use the Old Testament as their Scripture and steadily began to recognize many early Christian writings as authoritative. As we will see later, the eventual acceptance of the New Testament as part of the Church’s Scripture emerged in the third century. The apostolic fathers of the second century strained to articulate the message of the Bible, and especially the message of Jesus Christ, in a new world that had little or no understanding of either the Jewish matrix that had given birth to Jesus or the subsequent early reflection on what God had done in and through him. This task was undertaken, in different ways, by all these early interpreters, especially Clement of Alexandria (150–215), who bridged from the apostolic fathers and apologists of the second century to the patristic tradition of the third and later centuries.

The great fathers of the Church constantly used the Scriptures to develop and understand the Christian mysteries and the life and practice of the Church. There was *no single interpretation* of the Bible. Different methods of interpretation were used in the West and in the East, and in the East between Antioch and Alexandria. The great councils that determined the Christian community’s teaching and practice (Nicaea [325], Constantinople I [381], Ephesus [431], Chalcedon [451], Constantinople II [553]) are awash with reflections on the Word of God. Indeed, debate over the many possible meanings of the one text was at the heart of the heated conciliar disputes and generated “parties,” schisms, and even persecutions among Christian peoples. The results of this widespread, contested, and varied interpretation of the Bible can still be traced in the richness of that heritage. It is found in the writings of such figures in the West as Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 225), Saint Ambrose (340–97), Saint Jerome (347–420), Saint Augustine (354–430), Leo the Great (ca. 391–461), and Saint Gregory the Great (540–604), and in the East, Origen (184–254), Saint Athanasius (ca. 296–373), Saint John Chrysostom (347–407), Saint Basil (329–79), and Saint Gregory of Nyssa (335–95), to mention only a few of the giants from that era.

Many of these biblically inspired traditions were forced into the background in the eleventh century as papal authority struggled with the secular princes. A more juridical and less biblical, theological, and sacramental

self-understanding of Christianity began to develop.<sup>6</sup> In the medieval period significant women emerged, such as Margaret of Scotland (1045–93), Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–31), and Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1419). The great theological synthesis of Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) appeared. He had been preceded by Saint Anselm (1033–1109) and Peter Lombard (1096–1164), who wrote, along with his famous *Four Books of Sentences*, commentaries on the Psalms and the letters of Saint Paul. Thomas Aquinas had been taught by Saint Albert the Great (1193–1280). The essential point of reference in the differing approaches and critical questioning of *all these figures* was the Bible, despite a Church leadership that focused more closely on its legal authority over secular powers.

A similar richness can be heard in the splendor of the musical rendering of biblical texts in Gregorian chant and in the more delicate music of Hildegard of Bingen. It can be seen in the glass windows of the great medieval churches in Europe. Thomas Aquinas, whose theological synthesis brought the philosophy of Aristotle into the thought of the Church and was the high point of medieval Catholic thought, depended heavily on the Bible. He produced commentaries on the Psalms, Job, Lamentations, the Gospel of John, Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and Hebrews, and an amazing collection of *different* patristic readings of the four Gospels in his famous *Catena Aurea* (Golden Chain). He also looked upon Augustine, and his biblically based writings, as the greatest of the fathers of the Church.

### *The Council of Trent and Vatican I*

A narrowing of the Catholic Church's earlier rich practice of interpreting the Bible reaches back to the Council of Trent, which met intermittently from 1545 to 1563. This great ecumenical council was called to guide the Roman tradition in its struggle to respond to the Protestant Reformation. Briefly, the Council of Trent insisted that the interpretation of the Word of God as it is found in the Bible had to be directed by the teaching of the Church. By this stage in the history of the Catholic Church there were many doctrines and practices that could not be found in the New Testament. The Reformers

6. The development of a more juridically structured Church goes back to the reforms of Pope Gregory VII (1073–85). The authority of the Pope over the secular princes was dramatically acted out in the submission of Henry VII (Holy Roman Emperor) to Gregory VII at Canossa in 1077. For a brief summary of this period and its effects upon the Catholic Church's self-understanding, see Richard Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making*, Rediscovering Vatican II (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 145–47.

seized upon that, rejecting such beliefs and practices as the institution of the priesthood, many of the Marian teachings, the seven Sacraments, the papacy, and the real presence of the crucified and risen Jesus in the celebration of the Eucharist, to name some of the most critical points of division. These doctrines were not found in the Word of God, regarded by the Protestant tradition as found only in the Bible.

The council responded by teaching that there were two sources of Revelation: Tradition and Scripture. It was true that many doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church could not be found in the New Testament, but they could be found in the Tradition. If a belief or a practice of the Catholic Church could not be found in the New Testament, only one of the sources of Revelation, then the authentic Tradition of the Church could be called upon as the other source of Revelation. Never explicitly stated, there was a presupposition that the Revelation found in the Catholic Tradition was superior to the Revelation found in the Bible. It certainly appeared to have more authority. This same assessment of Tradition and Scripture as different sources of Revelation was repeated in 1870, in the Constitution *Dei Filius*, when Vatican I reexamined the Church's doctrine of Revelation. In the face of emerging radical, and sometimes anti-Christian, critical biblical scholarship, the authority of the Tradition was reaffirmed.

Another major decision made at Trent was the virtual "canonization" of the Latin Vulgate Bible. This Latin translation of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, which was largely (but not only) the work of Saint Jerome, was declared the text to be used by Catholics. The Church moved away from the original languages of Hebrew and Greek. For five centuries there was a neglect of the original biblical texts by laypeople and clergy. Those few who developed a biblical culture did so on the basis of the Latin text.<sup>7</sup>

Most Catholics are unaware of the richness of the Catholic practice of interpreting the Bible critically but within—and never against—the authentic Tradition, practiced in the Church for the greater part of fourteen hundred years. Passing "traditions," generated by a given time and place, are dearer to many Catholics than the Word of God. The acceptance and observance of these "traditions" can become the touchstone of Catholic orthodoxy, as a critical reading of the Bible is less common in Catholic practice.<sup>8</sup> This has

7. Some care is needed in assessing the Council of Trent. Crucial biblical issues were faced in the council's fourth session in April 1546, but the bishops, at that stage still hoping for the presence of some of the Reformers in Trent, nuanced what it taught. See John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 89–102. However, these nuanced positions *at the council* were applied more rigidly *after the council*. See *ibid.*, 260–75.

8. The use of the two forms of the same word, "Tradition" and "traditions," is common in Roman Catholic discussions. Within the Tradition one finds the long-standing and permanent

led to a decreased practice of reading and interpreting the New Testament in the Church.

Vatican II, in its all-determining agenda of returning to the sources of the faith (using the French word *ressourcement*), has asked all Catholics to rediscover the original “sources” of their faith and practice. This necessarily summons the whole of the Catholic Church to return to the Scriptures, but the process did not start with Vatican II. It had its beginnings in an encyclical of Leo XIII in 1893, *Providentissimus Deus* (PD), and a further biblical encyclical from Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (DAS), written in 1943 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of *Providentissimus Deus*.<sup>9</sup>

### *Leo XIII and Pius XII*

*Providentissimus Deus* comes from an era when the negative results of emerging—and sometimes stridently anti-Christian—critical biblical scholarship had to be countered (PD 2, 10). Great attention is given to the long Catholic tradition of studying the Word of God (PD 7–8) and the need to explain the Scriptures within that tradition (PD 15–17). According to *Providentissimus Deus*, the Word of God is authentically transmitted in the Latin Vulgate (PD 13) and is the result of divine authorship (PD 1: “a Letter written by our Heavenly Father, and transmitted by the sacred writers”), a theory that leads to a very restrictive notion of inerrancy (PD 21). The proper formation of Catholic teachers, and the course of studies that should be taught in the seminaries, up until this time was somewhat dependent on local decisions (PD 11–14). Everything must proceed under “the watchful care of the Church” (PD 6). Given the hostile context and the fact that Vatican I had spoken on this matter as recently as 1870 (*Dei Filius*), *Providentissimus Deus* is, on the whole, understandably defensive. However, something new was in the air, as Leo XIII explicitly stated: “Most desirable is it, and most

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beliefs that lie at the heart of Catholic life and practice, many of which are not found in the Bible (e.g., the Trinity, the human and the divine in Jesus, the seven Sacraments [including marriage], the papacy, the priesthood). On the other hand, “traditions” are beliefs and practices that come and go, often the result of given ecclesial, social, and civil situations (e.g., devotion to the Sacred Heart, devotion to Divine Mercy and its liturgical celebration, the many Marian devotions, Benediction and Adoration, the practice of the nine First Fridays and the five First Saturdays, clerical celibacy). However important they may be to some Catholics, traditions do not form part of the Tradition. See the further discussion of this matter below, pp. 199–201.

9. For another useful history of Catholic biblical scholarship in this period, see Okoye, *Scripture in the Church*, 69–91. The English translations of the two encyclicals cited here are Pope Leo XIII, *Holy Scripture* (*Providentissimus Deus*) (New York: Paulist Press, 1951), and Pope Pius XII, *Foundations of Renewal: Four Great Encyclicals of Pope Pius XII*, Deus Books (New York: Paulist Press, 1961), 64–87.

essential, that the whole teaching of theology should be pervaded and animated by the use of the divine Word of God. This is what the Fathers and the greatest theologians of all ages have desired and reduced to practice” (PD 16). In the midst of his careful defense of the theological agenda of the time, Leo XIII paved the way for the breakthrough of Pius XII’s *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943. However tentatively, in a number of areas creative biblical research is advocated. In a memorable affirmation Leo XIII makes clear:

But he [the Catholic biblical scholar] must not on that account consider that it is forbidden, when just cause exists, to push enquiry and exposition beyond what the Fathers have done; provided he carefully observes the rule so wisely laid down by St Augustine—not to depart from the literal and obvious sense, except only where reason makes it untenable or necessity requires. (PD 15, referring to Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 1.8.7:13)

Breaking from the dominance of the Latin text that had been in place since the time of the Council of Trent, the Pope instructs: “Hence it is most proper that professors of sacred Scripture and theologians should master those tongues in which the sacred books were originally written; and it would be well that Church students should also cultivate them, more especially those who aspire to academic degrees” (PD 17).

In 1890 Leo XIII had authorized the establishment of the École Biblique et Archéologique de Jérusalem by Marie-Joseph Lagrange, OP, and the Pontifical Biblical Commission was formed in 1902, the last year of his life. In his wake Pius X founded the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome in 1909. This new openness, however, was tempered by Pius X’s decree *Lamentabili sane* (1907) and his encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (1907). Pius X sensed that the “modern world” was alien to the Catholic Church and its traditions, and he strove to protect the integrity of Catholic faith and practice. Defensively, he spoke of a new heresy called “modernism” or even “Americanism.” It was difficult, even in those days, to understand what the elements of this “heresy” were, except for a general sense of any attachment to the allure of the modern world. Despite its subsequent outstanding contribution to Catholic biblical studies, the Pontifical Biblical Institute (with a small sister-house in Jerusalem) was founded by Pius X partly to “keep an eye on” what was emerging from the École Biblique. But something had been set loose in the Catholic Church, and the subsequent history of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, to this day one of the finest centers for critical biblical studies in the world, is an excellent indication of that truth.



Across the turn of the twentieth century there was an increasing sense of the importance of the Word of God for the life of the Church, only to be sidelined by concern over so-called modernism in the Catholic communion and, more important, two world wars and the arrogance, inhumanity, and slaughter that marked the first fifty years of the twentieth century (1914–19; 1940–45). Astonishingly, during a period of widespread conflict during the latter part of the Second World War, as the Allies struck back on all fronts, including in the Pacific, Pius XII produced *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. The situation of 1943 is appropriately described in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* 56:

If these things which We have said, venerable brothers and beloved sons, are necessary in every age, much more urgently are they needed in our sorrowful times, when almost all peoples and nations are plunged in a sea of calamities, when a cruel war heaps ruins upon ruins and slaughter upon slaughter, when, owing to the most bitter hatred stirred up among the nations, We perceive with greatest sorrow that in not a few has been extinguished the sense not only of Christian moderation and charity, but also of humanity itself.

This document was a watershed for Catholic biblical scholarship, and its influence is ongoing. The Holy Father exhibits exquisite awareness of the importance of critical scholarship. He insists that great advancements had taken place since 1893 (DAS 11–13). He asks for a return to the ancient languages as the source for all correct interpretation (DAS 14–18), and also that due respect be given to the other historical sciences: archaeology, philology, comparative religions, and other allied sciences (DAS 24, 33, 35–40). DAS 16 is memorable: “In like manner therefore ought we to explain the original text which, having been written by the inspired author himself, has more authority and greater weight than even the very best translation, whether ancient or modern.” The Holy Father states elsewhere: “For all human knowledge, even the non-sacred, has indeed its own proper dignity and excellence, being a finite participation of the infinite knowledge of God, but it acquires a new and higher dignity and, as it were, a consecration, when it is employed to cast a brighter light upon the things of God” (DAS 41).

Pius XII asks that Greek and Hebrew texts, in addition to the Latin Vulgate, “be published for the benefit of the Holy Church of God” (DAS 20). With great astuteness, the Holy Father defends the Vulgate and its role in the Catholic Tradition but points out that it was not established “particularly for critical reasons, but rather on account of its lawful use in the Church through so many centuries.” He rightly notes that “authenticity of this sort is called not primarily critical but juridical” (DAS 21). Although couched in a different

way, the role of the Word of God in theology is again found in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Speaking directly to Catholic exegetes, Pius XII insists:

With special zeal should they apply themselves, not only by expounding exclusively these matters which belong to the historical, archaeological, philological and other auxiliary sciences . . . but, having duly referred to these, in so far as they may aid the exegesis, they should set forth in particular the theological doctrine in faith and morals of the individual books or texts so that their exposition may not only aid the professors of theology in their explanations and proofs of the dogmas of faith, but may also be of assistance to priests in their presentation of Christian doctrine to the people, and finally may help all the faithful to lead a life that is holy and worthy of a Christian. (DAS 24)

Pius XII instructs Catholic scholars to use the same “scientific arms” as those used by all who study the Bible (DAS 42) and thus “endeavor to determine the peculiar character and circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources written or oral to which he had recourse and the forms of expression he employed” (DAS 33). Embracing this mandate, hardworking Catholic biblical scholars turned their minds, hearts, and lives to the service of the Christian and Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup> In a very brief time Catholic scholarship, especially in Europe and the United States, was regarded by scholars from all faiths as equal to the best in the world. Among the luminaries of this period were Joseph Coppens and Lucien Cerfaux in Belgium; Roland de Vaux, Pierre Benoit, and Marie-Émile Boismard at the French-speaking École Biblique; Rudolph Schnackenburg and Heinz Schürmann in Germany; Stanislaus Lyonnet and Maximilian Zerwick in Rome; and Carrol Steinmuller, Barnabas Ahern, and David Stanley in the United States and Canada. But old habits die hard, and these brave scholars and committed Roman Catholics often suffered from misunderstanding and rejection. Their integrity was often questioned, despite their loyalty to the Catholic Church and its authentic Tradition. The position of the Catholic Church had to be further spelled out; that took place at Vatican II.

## *Vatican II*

The texts that came from Vatican II (1962–65) are very different from the documents from earlier ecumenical councils. Part of the reason for this difference

10. These scholars took the Pope’s challenge seriously: “A biblical scholar who closes off to himself access to the original texts by the willful neglect of these cannot possibly escape the tag of superficiality and laziness” (DAS 15).

was the request of Pope John XXIII that this council not be one of great doctrinal debates but one that gave life to the Church in the contemporary world through reflection on the biblical, patristic, and liturgical traditions of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> The most important reason, however, was the practice of *ressourcement*. The fathers of the council wanted to go back to the *sources* of the Church's life, the Word of God as it is found in the Bible and in the patristic and liturgical life of the Catholic Tradition, and to express themselves in the language and style of those sources. The first document that appeared from the work of the council was *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), and one of the last was *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation). Vatican II began and ended in a way that signaled the return of the Word of God to its rightful place at the center of the life and practice of the Catholic Church.

### SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM

*Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC) was promulgated at the end of the council's second session on December 4, 1963. Ideological struggles within the council had begun to appear during the first session in 1962. A feature of this conflict between what has been called the conservative and the progressive elements in the council was the rejection of the Preparatory Commission's schemes *De Ecclesia* (On the Church) and *De Fontibus Revelationis* (On the Sources of Revelation) in the first session (November 1962). The council's maturing thought on the Word of God is found in *Dei Verbum*, promulgated as the council came to an end after the fourth session, on November 18, 1965. A process of theological and pastoral maturation took place between the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963) and *Dei Verbum* (1965), something that can be sensed in the sketch that follows.

When *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was formally approved in late 1963, the entire Catholic Church was amazed by its boldness. Principles stated in the document promised to make the liturgy, so crucial to Catholic faith and practice (see SC 1–2), understandable to all peoples and cultures. These truths were couched in a biblical and theological language that was unheard of in earlier conciliar documents.

- It is the liturgy through which, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, “the work of our redemption takes place,” and it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the Church (SC 2).

11. On the calling of Vatican II by Pope John XXIII and his hopes for the council, see John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 15–18.

- Christ Our Lord achieved his task principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension, whereby “dying, he destroyed our death and rising, restored our life.” For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth “the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church” (SC 5).
- To accomplish so great a work Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of his minister, “the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross,” but especially in the eucharistic species. By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anyone baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his Word since it is he himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in the Church (SC 7).

These and similar biblically and theologically rich affirmations opening *Sacrosanctum Concilium* enabled the council to announce that “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows” (SC 10) and to articulate the purpose of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in paragraph 14: “In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy the full and active participation by all the people is the paramount concern, for it is the primary, indeed the indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.”

As is carefully stated in the conciliar document, practices such as the introduction of the vernacular into liturgical celebrations; the renewal of the liturgical year; renewal of the use of liturgical books, including the lectionary; permission for clergy to concelebrate; respect for local cultures, their music, and their rites; and an increased respect for differing forms of art and architecture all flow logically from the theological and biblical basis upon which the document is founded. These practices were a dream for only a handful of Catholics who had looked back to the biblical, patristic, liturgical, and sacramental part of the Church Catholic in the preconciliar period. These Catholics were very few. For the rest of us, it all came as a surprise. As the first conciliar document to appear, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* protects many earlier traditions, including the primacy of the Latin Mass, the single celebrant, control of the Holy See, and the control of a “competent territorial ecclesiastical authority” or a local Ordinary over all change, no matter how insignificant some of these things may appear to us today.

But this first Constitution developed a new “literary form,” never seen before Vatican II. Almost every affirmation, either theological or pastoral, is inspired

or supported by the use of biblical texts. This characteristic is an indication of the decision of the fathers of the council, responding to the desires of Pope John XXIII for the council. This practice continued and strengthened as the council unfolded. It demonstrates what happens when the riches of the biblical text are well used in theological and pastoral discourse.

No space in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is specifically dedicated to the role of the Word of God in the liturgy, but the demand for a renewal of the liturgical life of the Church brought with it a plea for an increase of awareness of the importance of Scripture in the life of the Church. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* carried the seed that would produce further fruit in *Dei Verbum* and beyond. Although sometimes stated in passing, as attention is devoted to some other aspect of the liturgical renewal, some important new guidelines were established:

- In the “general norms” for the renewal of the liturgy, the council states: “Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy” (SC 24). It then lists the elements that depend upon the Word of God: the readings, the homily, the psalms, the eucharistic prayers, the collects, the hymns (see also SC 51). Typical of Roman documents, it goes on to say that this is nothing new but reflects “that warm and living love for scripture to which the venerable tradition of both eastern and western rites gives testimony.” My contemporaries have no memory of a “warm and living love for scripture” across that period. The “norm” that the proper use of the Word of God be the guiding principle for readings, homilies, eucharistic prayers, the prayers of the Mass, and hymns was new.
- In *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 33, in the norms devoted to the educative nature of the liturgy, an oft-neglected element in the liturgy emerges: the instruction of the faithful. “For in the liturgy God speaks to his people, Christ is still proclaiming his Gospel, and the people reply to God both in song and in prayer.” The liturgy is not simply the action of God; it is essentially dialogical, with the celebrant, no matter the rite, facilitating that dialogue.
- Consequently, in paragraph 35 from the same section of the document, the council gives a number of directives about the use of Sacred Scripture, including
  - a richer selection of texts;
  - preaching that is more biblical; and
  - Bible services as vigils for important feasts, especially in those places where a priest is unavailable.

A shadow of what will later be said (explicitly in *Dei Verbum*) appears several times in chapter 2 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, dedicated to the Most Sacred

Mystery of the Eucharist. The dynamic relationship that exists between the Word of God and the Sacrament of the Eucharist is clearly stated, first in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 48: “They [the faithful] should be formed by God’s word, and be nourished at the table of the Lord’s body.” A similar thought is found among the “norms” that appear in this chapter: the liturgy of the Word and the eucharistic ministry are so closely connected with each other “that they form but one single act of worship” (SC 56).

Much of the document legislates who will be responsible for the new initiatives, many of which have subsequently developed beyond what the council had in mind. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* gives more space to the liturgical year (102–11), to sacred music (112–21), and to sacred art and furnishings (122–29) than to the use of Scripture in the life and liturgy of the Church. But within its pages are the first steps that began the intense renewal in interest in the Scriptures in the life of the Church that was the logical consequence of *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. It was further enhanced in one of the council’s final documents, *Dei Verbum*.

### DEI VERBUM

*Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, was one of the great battlefields of the council. The rejection of the Preparatory Commission’s document on the sources of Revelation in 1962 led to the writing and rewriting of a potential conciliar statement across three years. This long gestation process produced a final text in 1965 that is an epoch-making statement on the communication that takes place between God and the human condition by means of Scripture and Tradition. The preface to the document states unequivocally that the council, citing Augustine, wishes “to set forth authentic teaching on divine Revelation and its transmission. For it wants the whole world to hear summons to salvation, so that through hearing it may believe, through belief it may hope, through hope it may come to love” (DV 1). The intimate link between Revelation and the Christian commitment to faith, hope, and love is established in a way unheard of in earlier teaching on Revelation. It is not something that responds to human needs but is rather the result of the loving initiative of God. Through a unique revealing initiative, God invites human beings into a relationship with the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit. Revelation is a gratuitous call to a personal intimacy with the Trinity (DV 2).

Despite opposition from conservative members of the council, throughout the document Scripture and Tradition are intimately linked. Both contribute “to make the people of God live their lives in holiness and increase their faith” and “converse with the spouse of His beloved Son” (DV 8). The two different

sources for Revelation are now regarded as one. The theological principle is stated unequivocally in *Dei Verbum* 9: “Sacred tradition and sacred scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. Flowing from the same divine wellspring, both of them merge, in a sense, and move towards the same goal.” This is a major contribution to the history of Roman Catholic thought. Despite a long tradition, running from Trent to Vatican I, a healthy tension is found in the words “both of them merge, in a sense [Latin: *in unum quodammodo coalescunt*], and move towards the same goal.” This statement comes as a result of serious debate at the council. Some sought a restatement of “two sources,” which they regarded as an already-established teaching of the Church (Trent and Vatican I), while others insisted that God’s dialogue with humans came from “the same divine wellspring,” nourished by both Scripture and Tradition. The fathers of the council wisely decided not to attempt a description of *how* the two merge into one. This is providential. We are dealing with divine communication with the human. The initiative in this communicative act lies with God, and thus we do not know *how* this functions, but the highest form of the Church’s Magisterium stated in *Dei Verbum* 9 that it happens.

Chapters dealing with Scripture, its inspiration and interpretation (DV 11–13), the Old Testament (DV 14–16), and the New Testament (DV 17–20) follow. The council follows Pius XII’s *Divino Afflante Spiritu* 35–42, endorsing the use of critical methods to interpret the Scriptures (DV 12). It insists on the essential historicity of the Gospels and their apostolic origins (DV 18–19). Between the lines one senses an understandable concern with European and American New Testament scholarship, especially in the period of the early 1960s, still under the fascination of Rudolf Bultmann’s brilliant existentialist reading of the New Testament, where “what actually happened” played a very minor (if any) role in the act of interpretation.

Reaching beyond these narrow academic concerns, the council asks for interpretation of the biblical text in the light of the fathers of the West and East and the Sacred Liturgy (DV 23). The council fathers correctly insist that “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). These elements of *Dei Verbum* have led many to insist that the Catholic scholar should never push at the boundaries of interpretation but should work only under the guidance of the teaching office of the Church. But *Dei Verbum* 10 indicates:

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in

the name of Jesus Christ. *The Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is rather its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the holy Spirit, it listens to this devoutly, guards it reverently and expounds it faithfully.* (emphasis added)

This passage needs careful exegesis and depends a great deal upon the distinction made between “the Word of God” and “the Magisterium.” The teaching office of the Church has come to be known (relatively recently) as the Magisterium. It is important to be aware that what is said in *Dei Verbum* 10 does not disrupt the unity that exists between the Word of God in the Scriptures and the Word of God in the Tradition, affirmed in paragraph 9. The Magisterium is a *third element*: the interpretative ministry of the Church’s leadership, “exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.” This is evident in the structure of the text of *Dei Verbum* itself when it deals with the issue of the transmission of Revelation. It first presents Scripture (DV 7), then the role of Tradition in both forming Scripture and handing it on (DV 8), then the union between Scripture and Tradition in a Revelation that flows “from the same divine wellspring” (DV 9).<sup>12</sup> Finally, the relationship between Revelation (found in Scripture and Tradition) and the teaching office of the Church is stated (DV 10). The Magisterium must always listen humbly to the Word of God that comes to it in *both* Scripture and Tradition. The Magisterium is *not* Revelation but humbly serves God’s self-revelation.

The final chapter of *Dei Verbum* is devoted to “Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church” (DV 21–26). This section of the document opens with one of the most memorable statements from Vatican II: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as it has venerated the Body of the Lord, in that it never ceases, above all in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the word of God and the Body of Christ” (DV 21). The parallel between the reception of the Eucharist and the reception of God’s Word from the same table strikes the Catholic mind and heart forcibly. There may have been a time when the Scriptures and the Eucharist were equally “venerated,” but this was not the case for Catholics all over the world in the preconciliar period. The Mass stood at the heart of what it meant to be Catholic, and Scripture played a very minor role.

*Dei Verbum* asked that a series of initiatives and practices be implemented to see that the Scriptures be restored to their place of veneration, side by side with traditional Catholic veneration of the Eucharist:

12. The word “wellspring,” approved by the council fathers, uses a rare but beautiful Latin word, *scaturigo*. It indicates a source that produces a flow of gifts.



- Provide access to the biblical text through accurate and correct translations (DV 22).
- Come to a deeper understanding of the Scriptures by reading them in the light of the patristic interpretations and the liturgy (DV 23).
- Make the Scriptures a source for theological reflection, not just a tool: “The study of the sacred page should be the very soul of sacred theology” (DV 24).
- Form all clergy in an adequate understanding of the Scriptures to enrich their preaching and pastoral ministry (DV 25a).
- Commission the bishops to ensure that these norms are put into place (DV 25b).

This rich section of *Dei Verbum* closes in paragraph 26 in a way that parallels its opening: “Just as from constant attendance at the eucharistic mystery the life of the Church draws increase, so a new impulse of spiritual life may be expected from increased veneration of the word of God, which ‘stands forever’ (Isa. 40:8; see 1 Pet. 1:23–25).”

## Conclusion

A commentary on the intimate link between the Word of God and the Eucharist can be found in Benedict XVI’s postsynodal exhortation of 2010. In *Verbum Domini* 56, he cites the striking words of Saint Jerome: “When we approach the Mystery, if a crumb falls to the ground we are troubled. Yet when we are listening to the Word of God, and God’s Word and Christ’s flesh are being poured into our ears yet we pay no heed, what great peril should we not feel?” The long process of gestation that ran from the council’s beginnings in 1962 until its closing moments in 1965 enabled the fathers of the council to come to a greater awareness of the centrality of the Sacred Scriptures. To repeat other, more famous words of Saint Jerome, much loved by Saint Therese of Lisieux, cited in her autobiography as she struggled to learn Hebrew and Greek: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (DV 25, citing the prologue of Jerome’s *Commentary on Isaiah*).

*Dei Verbum*, hand in hand with the liturgical renewal initiated by *Sacro-sanctum Concilium*, set in motion a renewal of Catholic focus on the Word of God. The council’s document on the liturgy initiated an important exposure to the Word of God. The gradual introduction of English into the celebration of the Eucharist and the Sacraments, and especially the eventual production of the postconciliar lectionary, stirred the minds and imaginations of many.

The first twenty years after the council were marked by great excitement and by a growth of interest in the Scriptures. Practicing Catholics began to hear, for the first time, from the historical, wisdom, and legislative texts of the Old Testament. Who were the prophets? When did they live, and what was their role in the life and faith of Israel? What is the difference between Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Who was Paul and why is he so important? The idea that “going to Mass” was now a privileged moment when the Church “never ceases . . . to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the word of God and the Body of Christ” (DV 21) led to an enthusiastic and excited response from the bulk of practicing Catholics but was fiercely opposed by a vocal minority.

This initial fervor has run into hard times, as Christian practice has run into hard times in the developed world. It is difficult to pinpoint just when and where this enthusiasm ran out of steam. It was not a dramatic process but the result of gradual cultural changes that have touched all aspects of life. Nevertheless, an ecumenical council is the highest level of the Church’s teaching and cannot be ignored. Two significant publications from the Holy See show that the council’s teaching on the centrality of the Scriptures in the life of the Church remains firmly at the heart of the Church’s agenda. The first of these is the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.<sup>13</sup> Second, Benedict XVI entrusted the 2008 Synod of Bishops with the theme of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. He subsequently released the postsynodal exhortation *Verbum Domini*. These documents are very different in scope and content, but both respond to the agenda initiated by *Dei Verbum*, paragraphs 21–26. The need for Benedict XVI to state his aim of pointing out “fundamental approaches to a rediscovery of God’s word in the life of the Church as a wellspring of constant renewal” (*Verbum Domini*, 1) indicates that fifty years after the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* this rediscovery and renewal are yet to be realized.

In the second decade of Christianity’s third millennium, bishops, priests, Catholic religious, and active Catholics are worried by matters they consider more urgent for the ongoing life of the Church than the Scriptures, but all Christian churches can be distracted from the need to rediscover the Scriptures as an essential element in God’s dialogue with humankind. Most Christian traditions now recognize that biblical interpretation within their Church must respect their Tradition. Although articulated at an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, it could be said of all Christians that their search for an encounter with God takes place by means of a Revelation that contains both

13. Rome: Editrice Vaticana, 1993.

Scripture and Tradition, flowing from the same divine wellspring, merging into a unity and tending toward the same end (see DV 9). “God’s word is not susceptible of being contained in a book.”<sup>14</sup>

The American Protestant scholar Frederick C. Grant, commenting on *Dei Verbum*, wrote almost fifty years ago: “What I wish is that we could all go back to the days of Erasmus and work together in harmony, especially in biblical studies, and forget about the intervening four centuries of confusion, distrust and antagonism. But history is irreversible. We must go on from where we are. Thank God, a brighter path is now opening up before us than any our fathers were compelled to tread.”<sup>15</sup> That “brighter path” is under threat as a secular and sometimes very hostile Western society questions the relevance of the Christian tradition and as Christians live lives that reflect poorly upon that tradition. But the dreams of *Dei Verbum* (1965) and the subsequent exhortations from the Pontifical Biblical Commission (*The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church* [1993]) and Pope Benedict XVI (*Verbum Domini* [2010]) remain part of our agenda. The primer that follows is a response to the request of the highest teaching office of the Catholic Church: an ecumenical council. The Church has repeatedly asked us to rediscover the richness that a critical reading of the New Testament offers to the life and practice of the Christian faith, especially in the Catholic tradition. This should be not an option but rather an essential element in “the life and mission of the Church.”

14. Käsemann, “Thoughts on the Present Controversy,” 274.

15. Frederick C. Grant, “A Response,” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966), 132.