

INSPIRATION AND INCARNATION: The Christological Analogy and the Hermeneutics of Faith

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*Holy Scripture, in its way of speaking, transcends all other sciences
because in one and the same statement while it narrates an event it
sets forth the mystery.—St. Gregory the Great¹*

The Second Vatican Council stipulated as a principle for authentic biblical interpretation that “holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written.”² This axiom, originally formulated by St. Jerome, has been a constant in the Catholic tradition.³ But what exactly does it mean? What implications does it have for biblical exegesis today? And in what sense can this ancient notion of “interpretation in the Spirit” guide contemporary biblical scholars seeking to employ the most rigorously objective, critical methodologies?

The lack of clarity or consensus regarding the meaning of the conciliar statement is illustrated by the widely divergent English translations. The edition available on the Vatican website, for example, reads: “holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit [sic] in which it was written.”⁴ Another standard edition of the Council’s documents is even more imprecise: “sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted with its divine authorship in mind.”⁵ The *Catechism of the*

1 *Morals on the Book of Job*, 20, 1, quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Pt. I, Q. 1, Art. 10 (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947).

2 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965), 12, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (Piscataway, NJ: New Century, 1966), 120. The Latin text reads: “*Sacra Scriptura eodem Spiritu quo scripta est etiam legenda et interpretanda sit.*” This extremely important phrase was inserted in the document only at the end of the last session of the Council. See Ignace de la Potterie, “Il Concilio Vaticano II e la Bibbia,” in *L’esegesi cristiana oggi*, eds. de la Potterie, et al. (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1991), 19–42.

3 *Dei Verbum* cites Pope Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, Encyclical Letter Commemorating the Fifteenth Centenary of the Death of St. Jerome (September 15, 1920), in *Enchiridion Biblicum: Documenti della Chiesa sulla Sacra Scrittura* [Documents of the Church Concerning Sacred Scripture] 2d. ed., ed. A. Filippi and E. Lora (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1993), 469; Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians* 5, 19–20, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Garnier and J.P. Migne, 1844–1864), 26, 417A. Hereafter abbreviated PL.

4 See www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

5 Austin Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1988).

Catholic Church's quotation of the text reads, "holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written."⁶ Oddly enough, the most important document issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission since the Council, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), never mentions this injunction from *Dei Verbum* 12.⁷

Despite the confusion and lack of attention, I would contend that "interpretation in the Spirit" expresses a principle of capital importance that, if properly applied, will help extricate biblical scholarship from the crisis in which it finds itself today.⁸ My aim in this article is to reflect on the principle of "interpretation in the Spirit" and show how it points the way toward a renewed biblical hermeneutic for the twenty-first century.

God's "Condescension" and the Sacramentality of Scripture

Dei Verbum itself immediately provides three criteria for interpreting Scripture in the Spirit, which have been spelled out in slightly more detail in the *Catechism*. It specifies that attention must be paid, first, to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture (the canon); second, to the living tradition of the Church; and third, to the harmony that exists between elements of the faith (the analogy of faith). These criteria, though necessary, are not necessarily sufficient, and they do not yet give us a substantive description of what it means to interpret in the Spirit.

To find the theological premise that grounds the principle of interpretation in the Spirit, we must look in the immediately subsequent paragraph of *Dei Verbum*. There, in describing the divine condescension by which God deigns to speak to us in humanly understandable words, the Council fathers drew an analogy with Christ's incarnation:

In Sacred Scripture, therefore, while the truth and holiness of God always remains intact, the marvelous "condescension" of eternal wisdom is clearly shown, "that we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express, and how far he has gone in adapting his language with thoughtful concern for

6 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 111.

7 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (September 21, 1993), in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchar, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 244–315. The document does, however, allude to it in a reference to *Dei Verbum* 23 (*Interpretation*, III.B.3) and obliquely in its section on philosophical hermeneutics (II.A.2).

8 For an incisive diagnosis of this crisis, see Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today," in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on the Bible and the Church*, ed. Richard J. Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 1–23.

our weak human nature.”⁹ For the words of God expressed in human language have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took to himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men.¹⁰

This analogy, comparing Scripture to the incarnation of Christ, hails from the earliest centuries of the Church. *Dei Verbum* itself is quoting St. John Chrysostom. Origen made a similar comparison: “Just as this spoken word cannot according to its own nature be touched or seen, but when written in a book and, so to speak, become bodily, then indeed is seen and touched, so too is it with the fleshless and bodiless Word of God; according to its divinity it is neither seen nor written, but when it becomes flesh, it is seen and written.”¹¹ Even earlier, Ignatius of Antioch said, “We must go to Scripture as to the flesh of Christ.”¹² The basic meaning of the analogy is clear: as Christ is fully human, like us in all things but sin, so Scripture is fully human, composed by human agents within the limitations of their historical, cultural and linguistic contexts and exercising the full powers of their intelligence and freedom. At the same time, as Christ is fully divine, so Scripture is truly the Word of God and expresses the revelation of God in all its fullness.

But this christological analogy is not merely a felicitous and enlightening comparison. It is making a theological assertion the significance of which is often overlooked—namely, that Scripture itself is a sacrament. That is, Scripture is a visible sign that both signifies *and makes present* the invisible divine mystery. This sacramentality of Scripture—like that of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, properly speaking—is founded on the sacramentality of Christ’s human nature, which is eternally joined to the Word of God and thus makes that Word visible, audible, and tangible in time and space. As the *Catechism* expresses it, “His humanity appeared as ‘sacrament,’ that is, the sign and instrument, of his divinity and of the salvation he brings: what was visible in his earthly life leads to the

9 The quotation is from St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Genesis* 3, 8 (Homily 17, 1), in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Garnier and J.P. Migne, 1957–1866), 53, 134. Hereafter abbreviated PG.

10 *Dei Verbum*, 13. Pope Pius XII referred to the same analogy in his *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies, 37 in *The Scripture Documents*, 115–139; see also Pope John Paul II, “On the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 23, 1993), in *The Scripture Documents*, 170–180.

11 *Commentary on Matthew* (PG 17, 289AB). See also Augustine, *City of God*, XVII, 6.2, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1866–90); Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, at 1:18 (PG 59, col. 97 sq.).

12 *Letter to the Philadelphians*, 4, 1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885–1887), 79–85.

invisible mystery of his divine sonship and redemptive mission.”¹³ Scripture, and especially the Gospels, extends this sacramentality of Christ’s humanity throughout the whole age of the Church by unveiling Christ’s identity and mission in such a way so that we are not merely told about him, but *brought into contact with him*.

How does Scripture do this? Let us consider first the New Testament. As some recent authors have emphasized, the New Testament, and particularly the Gospels, were written with the conviction that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and therefore all that he lived and taught on earth has been transfigured into a new mode of existence which becomes a source of grace for all who believe in him.¹⁴ The evangelists narrate each event in the earthly life of Jesus in such a way as to proclaim that this historically contingent event is *still present* because its protagonist is alive, and that the reader can come into contact with him by accessing the unique grace and power revealed in this event. In other words, the New Testament authors relate Christ’s earthly words and deeds in a manner that is “transparent” to the post-resurrection Church and the present activity of the risen Lord, so as to enable the reader to see how the living Jesus is accessible to us, here and now.

For example, in the account of the healing of the blind man, Mark mentions that after receiving his sight, the blind man followed Jesus “on the way” (Mark 10:52). Since “the way” was the earliest term for Christianity (Acts 9:2; 24:14), this subtle allusion helps the reader recognize that he or she too has been set on the path of discipleship by being healed of (spiritual) blindness by Jesus. The Gospel account is written so as to uncover the true depths of this event that took place in Jericho 2,000 years ago. It is a sign drawing the reader into an *experience* of the risen Lord’s power to open the eyes of the blind, a power still at work for those who cry out to him in faith. The pattern of Jesus’ action is somehow replicated in our own present-day experience, such that we are mysteriously drawn into ontological participation in the event.

A similar movement is discernible in the story of the healing of the paralytic lowered through the roof (Mark 2:1–12; Matt. 9:2–8; Luke 5:18–26). All three Synoptics recount Jesus’ declaration of his power to forgive in such a way that it may readily be interpreted as a parenthetical remark to the reader: “But that *you* may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins, he said to the paralytic.”¹⁵ They thus portray the experience of forgiveness in someone who was

13 *Catechism*, no. 515.

14 Francis Martin, “St. Matthew’s Spiritual Understanding of the Healing of the Centurion’s Boy,” *Communio* 25 (1998), 160–77. See also Ignace de la Potterie, “Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Spirit in Which It Was Written,” in ed. René Latourelle, *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives*, vol. 1 (New York: Paulist, 1988), 220–66; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000).

15 This reading does not preclude others, and it may well be that the evangelists deliberately left the syntax ambiguous (there being no punctuation in the Greek). See Mark 7:19; 13:37 for other examples of such asides to the reader.

also physically healed by Jesus, in a manner that helps the reader recognize that such forgiveness is *now* available to all those who are led to him in faith.¹⁶ In the words of St. Leo the Great, “All those things which the Son of God both did and taught for the reconciliation of the world, we not only know in the account of things now past, but we also experience in the power of works which are present.”¹⁷

For the evangelists to narrate in this way is not to disregard history, or “what actually happened,” but to consciously interpret history in a way that is open to the invisible mystery revealed through it. This is why the events in Jesus’ earthly life have traditionally been called “mysteries” (which is simply the Greek equivalent of “sacraments”)—they have an interior depth and power to which we are led by the manner in which Scripture recounts those events.¹⁸ As the Gospel is proclaimed, especially in the liturgy, and as the hearer contemplates these mysteries in faith, “what was visible in [Christ’s] earthly life” *still today* “leads to the invisible mystery of his divine sonship and redemptive mission.”

“The Heart of Christ” and Scripture’s Spiritual Sense

The sacramental quality of the Gospels also applies, though in a more hidden and indirect way, to the entire Bible. From the beginning, the Church has held that Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation and fulfillment of all that is contained in the Hebrew Scriptures—that the Old Testament as well as the New leads us into the mystery of the Son of God made man. This conviction, according to the New Testament, was rooted in the interpretive practice of Jesus himself. “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” he said to the Jews gathered in the synagogue at Nazareth, after reading from the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:21). Luke frames Jesus’ entire public ministry within this context of scriptural fulfillment by noting at the end of the Gospel that on the road to Emmaus, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27–28). Luke thereby indicates that “all of Jesus’ preaching is an interpretive program about all the Scriptures,”¹⁹ in which the things done

16 For further examples, see Francis Martin, “Historical Criticism and New Testament Teaching on the Imitation of Christ,” *Anthropotes* 6 (1990): 261–87.

17 Pope St. Leo the Great, *On the Passion*, 12, quoted in Martin, “St. Matthew’s Spiritual Understanding,” 163.

18 Compare the *Catechism*, 512–521. After stating that “Christ enables us to live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives it in us,” the *Catechism* goes on to quote St. John Eudes: “We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus’ life and his mysteries and often to beg him to perfect and realize them in us and in his whole Church . . . For it is the plan of the Son of God to make us and the whole Church partake in his mysteries and to extend them to and continue them in us and in his whole Church. This is his plan for fulfilling his mysteries in us.”

19 See Denis Farkasfalvy, “The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s Document on Jews and Christians and Their Scriptures: An Attempt at an Evaluation,” *Communio* 29 (2002), 715–37, at 721.

and taught in the past are now understood in a new light as “fulfilled,” that is, definitively realized in their deepest meaning, by Christ.

The fulfillment motif is even more pronounced in Matthew, who regularly draws attention to specific biblical prophecies fulfilled by Christ and indicates through typological correspondences how Christ mysteriously recapitulates in himself the history of the chosen people.²⁰ The theme is equally prominent in the Gospel of John, where Jesus indicts the Jewish authorities for their failure to recognize that even the Pentateuch points to him: “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; but it is they that bear witness to me If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me” (John 5:39, 46). The fact that this pronouncement is in the form of a reproach implies that these erudite students of the law should have understood that the law was pointing to Christ, and that, therefore, a christological meaning is objectively present, though hidden, in the words and deeds of God as recounted in the Old Testament, and is available (at least incipiently) to those whose hearts are open to it.

As Schnackenburg observes, “For the evangelist, it is not only that individual sayings of Scripture are fulfilled in Jesus (John 12:38; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 19:24, 36), but the whole of Scripture is directed towards him and speaks of him (12:41). The word of Scripture and his own word form a unity (2:22), and in the light of his glorification the Scripture finally discloses its hidden meaning (12:16; 20:9).”²¹ The letters of Paul and the apostolic preaching recorded in Acts provide further evidence that for the early Church, the gospel kerygma was inseparable from, and found its essential credentials in, the validity of the claim that Jesus confers on the Hebrew Scriptures their ultimate, God-given meaning and intelligibility (see Acts 3:18; 1 Cor. 15:3–5). And conversely, the coming of Christ is only intelligible against the background of its preparation in the Old Testament.

Reflecting on the New Testament witness, the fathers of the Church elaborated the principle that because God is the Author of history, every event recounted in Scripture is a mystery whose inner depths reveal something of God and his gracious dealings with humanity. And because the center and culminating point of those dealings is the new covenant established through the incarnation and paschal sacrifice of God’s Son, there is a christological sense in all parts of the Bible. In the famous words of Hugh of St. Victor, “All Sacred Scripture is but one book, and this one book is Christ, because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ.”²² Every event narrated in the Old Testament, as well as every prophecy and poem and prayer, is also a revelation of

20 Cf. Matt. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9.

21 Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 2 (New York: Seabury, 1980), 125.

22 Hugh of St. Victor, *De arca Noe*, 2, 8, in *PL* 176, 642, quoted in *Catechism*, no. 134.

Christ the incarnate Word, capable of “leading us into the mystery” of his divine sonship and salvific mission when it is read in light of the gospel.

The notion of a hidden christological meaning that pervades the Bible, which was held unanimously by Christian tradition until the last few centuries, is what was traditionally called the “spiritual sense” of Scripture.²³ Strictly speaking, the spiritual sense refers to the Old Testament’s foreshadowing of the New, since in the New the reality of Christ and the new covenant is no longer hidden but patent. But the term is sometimes used more broadly. As noted above, both the Old Testament and the New have a “spiritual sense” understood as a capacity to lead us into the invisible mystery of Christ. The difference, of course, is that the christological significance of Old Testament passages cannot be attributed to the conscious intent of the human authors.

It is important to define the spiritual sense properly, since it is frequently confused with other phenomena that occur in text reception and interpretation, especially in the ancient world. The New Testament’s spiritual interpretation of the Old is sometimes described by biblical scholars, for instance, as an instance of *peshar* exegesis like that practiced by the ancient rabbis, in which earlier texts are quoted or paraphrased in new contexts that alter their meaning.²⁴ So, for instance, when the fourth Gospel quotes Zechariah at the crucifixion scene, “They shall look on him whom they have pierced” (John 19:37), he is applying a method similar to that of the Essenes at Qumran when they reinterpreted Habakkuk as a cryptically encoded allegory referring to the founder of their own community.²⁵ Or the spiritual sense is described as an “added” sense—added, that is, by the interpreter.²⁶ Even the Pontifical Biblical Commission falls into this confusion when it speaks of the New Testament’s “retrospective re-readings” of the Old Testament,²⁷ as Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy, himself a member of the commission, has pointed out.²⁸ To speak of a retrospective re-reading is to imply (even if inadvertently) that this interpretation is not based on something inherent in the text. The term “*sensus plenior*,”

23 Farkasfalvy, “The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s Document.”

24 Cf. Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), esp. 26–27, 54–58.

25 *Habakkuk Commentary*, 7.1–6 in *The Midrash Peshar of Habakkuk*, trans. William H. Brownlee, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 24 (Missoula, MO: Scholars Press, 1979).

26 Joseph Fitzmyer, “Problems of the Literal and Spiritual Senses of Scripture,” *Louvain Studies* 20 (1995), 134–146.

27 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2003), 21. The document goes so far as to assert that, “Although the Christian reader is aware that the internal dynamism of the Old Testament finds its goal in Jesus, this is a retrospective perception whose point of departure is not in the text as such, but in the events of the New Testament proclaimed by the apostolic preaching.”

28 Farkasfalvy, “The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s Document,” 729.

coined by recent exegetes, can also tend to perpetuate this misunderstanding by reducing the spiritual sense to a “fuller” literal sense.²⁹

Why are these descriptions inadequate? Perhaps no one has done more to retrieve a correct understanding and appreciation of the ancient doctrine of the spiritual sense than Henri de Lubac.³⁰ As de Lubac has demonstrated, the spiritual sense, correctly understood, is not a property of texts but of history. The spiritual sense does not refer to a literary relationship but an ontological relationship. It is founded on the unity of the two covenants within the divine economy of salvation: by God’s infinite wisdom and foreknowledge, all the events, persons and institutions in the old covenant prefigure, prepare for, and point to the new. Thus the spiritual sense is not an additional meaning retrospectively superimposed on the texts in the light of new events, but something that was *already hidden* in those things written about in the texts. As de Lubac expressed it:

[T]he very facts have an inner significance; although in time, they are yet pregnant with an eternal value . . . the reality which is typified [typologically prefigured] in the Old—and even the New—Testament is not merely spiritual, it is incarnate; it is not merely spiritual but historical as well. For the Word was made flesh and set up his tabernacle among us. The spiritual meaning, then, is to be found on all sides, not only or more especially in a book but first and foremost *in reality itself*.³¹

This view is in full accord with Aquinas’ classical definition of the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture,³² which, significantly, has been taken up virtually unmodified by the *Catechism* (see no. 117), though it was not mentioned in *Dei Verbum*. According to Aquinas, the literal meaning is that which is signified by the words of Scripture; the spiritual meaning is what is in turn signified by the *things or events* conveyed by the words. For instance, the word “temple” in its literal sense denotes the Jewish house of worship in Jerusalem; the Temple itself (the historically existing house of worship, not merely texts about the Temple) spiritually signifies the Church. God’s deliverance of his people through the crossing of

29 See Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O’Neill (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 150. This volume is a compendium of texts from de Lubac’s *Histoire et Esprit* and *Exègèse médiévale*, earlier published in English as *Sources of Revelation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968).

30 For helpful assessments of de Lubac’s contribution in this area, see Marcellino D’Ambrosio, “The Spiritual Sense in de Lubac’s Hermeneutics of Tradition,” *Letter & Spirit* 1 (2005), 147–57; Susan K. Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

31 Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism*, trans. Lancelot Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 168, citing Maximus the Confessor.

32 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Pt. I, Q. 1, Art. 10.

the Red Sea, not merely the narrative of the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus, spiritually prefigures baptism.³³ Rightly understood, therefore, the spiritual sense is a property unique to sacred Scripture, as having a divine Author who is also the Author of all history. The Old Testament's radical christological orientation "was not imposed from without, like a label, by Christian apologetics: 'It is within [the Old Testament] and penetrates all its parts.' If we represent salvation history by a line, Christ is at its end, middle, and every point in between."³⁴

Readers will recognize that the Exodus example raises a problem: that of the historicity of the events narrated in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. To what degree did the Israelites' actual departure from Egypt differ from the stylized account of it handed down through centuries of oral tradition and preserved in the final redaction of the book of Exodus? Generations of biblical exegetes have debated this question without resolution; indeed complete resolution is impossible given our distance from the event and the meagerness of the historical record. However, this problem need not jeopardize the inquiry into the literal or spiritual senses. As philosophical hermeneutics has shown, it is an illusion to think we can attain a raw, "objective" factuality independent of human testimony.³⁵ Our primary (in some cases, only) access to biblical events is through the biblical narrative; thus the literal sense of the narrative (on which the spiritual is based) is not "what really happened" but the historical referent precisely *as mediated to us by the canonical text*. In the words of *Dei Verbum*: "[God's] plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having in inner unity; the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them."³⁶

Although the history of the chosen people was already objectively pregnant with this mysterious christological significance, that is not to say that this significance could have been discerned beforehand. The marvelous preparations and hidden rays of anticipation can only be appreciated in retrospect, when they are all woven together in transcendent fulfillment. In that sense, the incarnation and the act of love in which Christ died effects "a real change in Scripture, which the ancients compare to the eucharistic consecration. They love to see Scripture as a loaf of bread in Christ's hands: 'The Lord Jesus took the loaves of Scripture in his hands. . . .' In his very act of offering himself to the Father in sacrifice, the bread is consecrated and changed into him."³⁷ As the *Catechism* (see no. 112) puts it, quoting

33 See Mary Healy, "Behind, in Front of . . . or Through the Text? The Christological Analogy and the Lost World of Biblical Truth," in *"Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans / Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2003), 181–195.

34 Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*, trans. Edward Hagman (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 46, quoting Hoskyns.

35 See Iain Provan, "Knowing and Believing: Faith in the Past," in *"Behind" the Text*, 229–66.

36 *Dei Verbum*, 2.

37 Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 52, quoting Rupert, *Commentary on John*, VI (PL 169, 443d).

St. Thomas, "The phrase 'heart of Christ' can refer to Sacred Scripture, which makes known his heart, closed before the Passion, as the Scripture was obscure. But the Scripture has been opened since the Passion; since those who from then on have understood it, consider and discern in what way the prophecies must be interpreted."

Who could have ever imagined, for instance, that the Ark of the Covenant before which David danced for joy prefigured an infinitely more intimate dwelling place for God among his people, Mary the Ark of the New Covenant in whose womb his very flesh was enclosed, and before whom John the Baptist leaped for joy before his birth? Who could have fathomed that Eve's creation from the rib of the sleeping Adam would foreshadow the Bride of the New Adam, the Church, born from his pierced side in the sleep of death? Who could have guessed that Joseph's betrayal by his brothers, which ultimately led to his saving them from famine as prime minister of Egypt, would anticipate Christ's rejection by his own "brothers," which led to his saving them from eternal death through his gift of the bread of life? These examples, found already in the New Testament's use of the Old Testament and then developed in the writings of the Church fathers, could be multiplied indefinitely.

The Mysticism of Exegesis

At this point we can return to the question of "interpretation in the Spirit," since it is clear that the spiritual depths with which Scripture is laden can only have been imparted to it by the Holy Spirit. The christological analogy has a further implication: as Christ became incarnate in the womb of the Virgin through the Holy Spirit, so the Word of God becomes "incarnate" on the sacred page through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's work of inspiration is not merely a one-time event; for the fathers, "inspiration is not just something that acted once on the sacred writers, resulting in the inspired texts. It is an ongoing and ever-present influence at work within the Books themselves, which are and remain inspired. . . . They remain filled with the Spirit of God and are constantly and 'miraculously made fruitful by him.'"³⁸ Here we could draw an analogy with creation: in the biblical view, creation is not an act that once accomplished, is over, but is rather God's continuous act of holding the universe in existence by his creative power.³⁹

Dei Verbum implicitly grounds its directive regarding "interpretation in the Spirit" in this doctrine of inspiration by the Spirit. In the immediately preceding section, the document quotes the classic biblical text on inspiration, 2 Timothy 3:16–17: "All Scripture is inspired by God [literally, God-breathed] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (*Dei Verbum*, 2). The

38 Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 27.

39 Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 28.

implication is that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the writing of Scripture and thus imparted its sacramental quality, must equally inspire the interpretation of what was written, just as, if a message is written in code, the code is also required in order to read it. As Gregory the Great expressed it, "Just as the Spirit of life touches the mind of the prophet, he also touches the mind of the reader."⁴⁰ Scripture is a divine act of communication, and an act of communication is not complete until it has been received and understood according to the intent of the speaker.⁴¹

This logical connection between inspiration and interpretation is asserted explicitly in another Pauline passage, where the apostle tells the Corinthians that "no one comprehends the divine realities except the Spirit of God. Now we have received. . . the Spirit from God, that we might understand what has been given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual realities to those who are spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:11–13). Unlike the understanding of earthly realities, which is acquired through sense experience or reason, understanding of the depths of God and his hidden counsels surpasses the natural capacities of the mind and can only be acquired through the Spirit. Although the mystery is mediated through human communication (both oral proclamation and written scripture), the Holy Spirit must preside over the entire process of communication from beginning to end. "Already in Pauline theology, inspiration and interpretation are regarded as correlatives—that is, the principles and the method used in exegesis depend on what one thinks about the way God influenced the origins of the text."⁴² This is why Paul insists that to perceive the christological sense of the Old Testament requires an act of conversion and of yielding to the Spirit: "Whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts, but whenever a person turns to the Lord the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:15–16).

The Gospels, in a different way, also allude to an understanding that can only be conferred by God, that penetrates beyond the surface of things (and especially of the Scriptures) to the divine mystery concealed in them.⁴³ Luke, in particular,

40 *Commentary on Ezekiel*, Hom. VII, I, 9–16 (PL 76, 844–48).

41 For thought-provoking analysis of the implications of interpreting Scripture as a divine speech-act, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of Covenant," in eds. Craig Bartholomew, et al., *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster / Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 1–49.

42 Farkasfalvy, "The Pontifical Biblical Commission's Document," 718.

43 The evangelists, each in his own characteristic manner, portray Jesus as repeatedly prompting his disciples to become aware of a deeper level of reality, and expressing surprise at their incomprehension of it. Mark in particular develops the theme of the disciples' spiritual obtuseness in regard to parables and enigmatic sayings (4:13; 7:18; 8:17–21), the meaning of human realities such as death (5:39), Jesus' gestures as revelatory of his person (6:52), and the understanding of God's plan for a crucified and risen Messiah (8:33; 9:10, 32; 10:38). The motif is also present in Matthew (15:16; 16:9–12, 23; 20:22) and Luke (9:45; 18:34; 24:25–27). John too emphasizes the spiritual dullness of Jesus' interlocutors (8:27; 12:16; 13:7; 20:9) and the

emphasizes that such spiritual understanding occurs by a divine work of “opening their minds,” as Jesus did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:45). For John, to impart such understanding is the specific role of the Spirit: “the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father. . . will bear witness to me” (John 15:26; compare John 12:16; 14:25–26; 16:12–15; 20:9; 2 Pet. 1:20–21).

Thus for the New Testament, the power of Scripture to bring us into contact with the living Christ is dependent on an ongoing work of the Spirit, bringing to light its deepest meaning and bearing witness to its truth in the mind of the believer. The conclusion that inescapably follows is that exegesis can never be completely reduced to the application of correct methods to the text. There is necessarily a subjective, personal involvement of the interpreter as a recipient of the divine act of communication. This is why de Lubac insists, following the patristic and medieval tradition, that biblical interpretation is inseparable from the spiritual life, or indeed from mysticism, understood as the personal appropriation of the mystery of Christ revealed in Scripture.⁴⁴

The Christian mystery is not something to be curiously contemplated like a pure object of science, but is something which must be interiorized and lived. It finds its own fullness in being fulfilled within souls. . . . Still more fundamentally, the entire process of spiritual understanding is, in its principal, identical to the process of conversion. It is its luminous aspect.⁴⁵

For this reason de Lubac argues that biblical exegesis can never be a purely objective science.⁴⁶ “Exegesis is not technique; it is mysticism.”⁴⁷ Biblical interpretation cannot be complete unless it takes into account “the connection between spiritual understanding and the personal conversion and life of the Christian . . . the relationship between ‘New Testament’ and ‘New Man,’ between newness of understanding and newness of spirit.”⁴⁸

Christological Heresies and the Future of Exegesis

If this is the case, must we give up on the possibility of objectivity in the field of biblical exegesis? Does “interpretation in the Spirit” dissolve the distinction between exegesis and “eisegesis” (reading into a text), and open the door to a

Lord’s distress over it (3:10; 14:9), and develops the theme of the deeper, spiritual meaning of earthly realities such as the temple (3:21), birth (3:4), water (4:15), bread (6:34), to awaken (11:11), to wash (13:9), and to depart (7:35; 13:36).

44 See William F. Murphy, “Henri de Lubac’s Mystical Tropology,” *Communio* 27 (2000), 171.

45 De Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 21.

46 De Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 23. See also D’Ambrosio, “Spiritual Sense,” 152–54.

47 Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 52.

48 De Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 144.

profusion of subjective and fanciful interpretations whose only limit is the piety of the exegete? Are there no longer any controls to distinguish between valid and invalid interpretations? The christological analogy helps point the way out of the quandary. As in Christ's hypostatic union, the two "natures" of Scripture are not in tension or juxtaposition but in indissoluble unity; we cannot pick apart a verse or chapter and decide which part is "divine" and which is "human." However, there is an order to the two with regard to our knowing. Just as we cannot come to know the triune God except through the humanity of Christ, so we cannot approach the divine or revelatory meaning of the Bible except through its human meaning. The spiritual meaning shines precisely *through* the literal, as the divinity of Christ radiates through his humanity. This is the basis for the traditional insistence on the priority of the literal sense as the foundation for the spiritual.⁴⁹

Just as there are imbalanced christologies, so there can be forms of scriptural interpretation which fail to hold the two dimensions of the biblical word in full integrity and unity. One of these might be called a "Monophysite" type of exegesis. Like the ancient heresy which denied Christ's human nature, this kind of approach downplays or ignores the human factors that went into the composition of the biblical text. It accords the biblical words an absolute value, independent of the conditions of human language and culture.⁵⁰ In its extreme form, it envisions the human authors as sacred secretaries who simply transcribed as the Holy Spirit dictated—in other words, not as *authors* in any authentic sense. In a more mild form, it blithely disregards the literal sense of the text and thus gives rise to spiritual interpretations which range from the subjective and arbitrary to the self-serving and even frivolous. As critics often point out, there are examples of such fanciful readings among certain writings of the fathers.

The other one-sided form of exegesis, more typical of modern scholarship, might be called "Nestorian."⁵¹ Similar to the heresy that denied the unity of Christ's two natures in one person, this approach, while not necessarily denying the divine dimension of Scripture, so isolates it from the human that it is reduced to a post-exegetical addendum. Such an approach intentionally and methodologically considers the text as a purely human reality, and superimposes the divine only as a second operation *after* the crucial interpretive judgments have already been made. Questions regarding the genesis of the text and the concerns of the authors or redactors are asked and answered within a purely human framework, ignoring or abstracting from the fact that God himself is speaking through the biblical word.⁵² The danger is that horizontal explanations are then constructed for what

49 *Catechism*, no. 116; *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I, Q.1, Art. 10, Resp. 1.

50 See Pope John Paul II, "On the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," 8.

51 This use of the term "Nestorian" as applied to exegesis seems to have originated with Louis Bouyer, "Où en est le mouvement biblique?" *Bible et vie chrétienne* 13 (1956), 7–21.

52 It is important to note that, as philosophical hermeneutics has shown, all interpretation

actually has only a vertical explanation. The result is often a reductive interpretation, which leaves ordinary believers uneasy and confused about the compatibility of the exegetical conclusions with Christian faith, and doubtful about the divine realities being conveyed in the text.

At times, this kind of exegesis can tend toward a kind of fideism in which Church doctrine is affirmed even while the supposedly objective exegetical results are tending in the opposite direction. In its extreme form (exemplified by the Jesus Seminar⁵³), it results in a secular explanation of the text, irreconcilable with other biblical assertions and with the unity of the biblical testimony as a whole. It is important to note that this kind of exegesis is not incapable of producing valid insights. But its failure to come to grips with the sacramentality of Scripture—that is, Scripture’s power to lead us into the divine mystery—leaves it vulnerable to the risk of error and distortion, and renders it ultimately defective as a means of access to the word.

How, then, is the humanness of Scripture to be granted its legitimate autonomy without draining the word of its divine power? What is needed is a “Chalcedonian” form of exegesis, which, like the creedal formulation that resolved the christological heresies of the early Church, does full justice to the human and the divine aspects of Scripture in their integral unity. Such an exegesis would take seriously the human authorial processes and rigorously investigate the relevant manuscripts, languages, literary genres, historical contexts, cultural settings, and so on—but as open *from the beginning* to the Word’s own dynamic movement toward the interior and the vertical.⁵⁴ The logical priority of the human dimension is at the service of the teleological priority of the divine: interpretation is for the sake of the knowledge of God in Christ.

Pope John Paul II articulated this balance well when he exhorted the

depends upon, and is conditioned by, fundamental presuppositions. The relevant question is whether that pre-understanding is informed by Christian faith or not. For a detailed discussion of this development see Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980). For a brief summary, see R.L. Maddox, “Contemporary Hermeneutic Philosophy and Theological Studies,” *Religious Studies* 21 (1985), 517–29. For an illuminating example of how the interpreter’s presuppositions influence even such apparently neutral and technical levels of exegesis as textual criticism and lexicography, see Al Wolters, “Confessional Criticism and the Night Visions of Zechariah,” in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Craig Bartholomew, et al. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 90–117.

53 For a representative text of the Jesus Seminar, see Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

54 Peter Stuhlmacher argues for a “Hermeneutics of Consent to the biblical texts,” which is marked by “a willingness to open ourselves anew to the claim of tradition, of the present, and of transcendence.” *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 83, 85.

members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission: "The Church of Christ takes the realism of the incarnation seriously, and this is why she attaches great importance to the 'historico-critical' study of the Bible. . . . Nevertheless, this study is not enough. . . it is obviously necessary that the exegete himself perceive the divine word in the texts. He can do this only if his intellectual work is sustained by a vigorous spiritual life."⁵⁵ The interpenetration of critical methods and faith is an instance of the broader interrelationship of reason and faith:

[In the biblical text] Faith intervenes not to abolish reason's autonomy nor to reduce its scope for action, but solely to bring the human being to understand that in these events it is the God of Israel who acts. Thus the world and the events of history cannot be understood in depth without professing faith in the God who is at work in them. . . . There is thus no reason for competition of any kind between reason and faith: each contains the other, and each has its own scope for action.⁵⁶

A deeper appreciation of the christological analogy and the implications of the doctrine of biblical inspiration for exegesis can lead us to a new springtime of Scripture study in the Church. If Catholic biblical scholarship follows the wise counsel of *Dei Verbum*, it will avail itself of all the rich resources of critical methods, but will, at the same time, lead the faithful to feed on that life-giving bread, to eat and drink Christ the Word made flesh. I would like to conclude by quoting a friend and distinguished biblical scholar, Craig Bartholomew:

The subject of Scripture is Christ, and an adequate hermeneutic looks for and finds him again and again in the Bible. Scripture is that field in which is hid Christ, the great treasure, and any hermeneutic which does not make its goal to dig up that treasure is misdirected. God has, through the events that underlie the Bible, 'led his people to the feet of Someone.' Biblical interpretation should have as its goal those same feet!⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Pope John Paul II, "On the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," 7, 9.

⁵⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical Letter on the Relationship of Faith and Reason (September 14, 1998), 16–17, in *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, ed. J. Michael Miller, C.S.B. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2001), 849–913.

⁵⁷ "Protestants and Catholics Together," (Paper delivered at the Seventh Annual Seminar of the Scripture and Hermeneutics Project, Rome, June 24, 2005).

