

MAGISTERIAL TEACHING ON THE INSPIRATION AND TRUTH OF SCRIPTURE

Precedents and Prospects

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Following the 2008 Synod of Bishops on “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,” the Pontifical Biblical Commission took up a new subject for study, namely, the inspiration and truth of the Bible. The reason for this choice was at least twofold. First, the commission was ready to tackle a new subject following the publication, earlier in 2008, of its document, *The Bible and Morality*.¹ Second, the Synod itself, in one of the fifty-five “final propositions” it submitted to Pope Benedict XVI, had recommended that the concepts of the inspiration and truth of the Bible be clarified by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.² Since the biblical commission is a consultative body to the doctrinal congregation on biblical matters, it was only natural that it should take up this proposal.

Thus far, the biblical commission has dedicated its 2009 and 2010 plenary meetings to the study of the Bible’s inspiration and truth.³ It is unclear how many more annual meetings will be dedicated to this subject.⁴ It is also unclear when, or in what form, the outcome of the commission’s study will be published, if at all.⁵ In light of these developments, it is timely to review the existing magisterial

1 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality: Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008).

2 “The Synod proposes that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clarify the concepts of the inspiration and truth of the Bible, as well as their reciprocal relationship, in order to make the teaching of *Dei Verbum*, 11, better understood. In particular, it is necessary to highlight the originality of Catholic biblical hermeneutics in this area.” Synod of Bishops, 12th Ordinary General Assembly, List of Propositions, 12. Available (in Italian) online at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20081025_elenco-prop-finali_it.html.

3 Regarding the April 20–24, 2009, plenary meeting, the Vatican Information Service explained that “attention will be given to a new study entitled ‘Inspiration and Truth of the Bible’” (April 16, 2009) (<http://visnews-en.blogspot.com/2009/04/plenary-assembly-of-pontifical-biblical.html>). For the April 12–16, 2010, meeting, the Vatican reported that “the members of the commission will turn their attention to the subject of ‘Inspiration and Truth of the Bible.’ As the first stage of its study, the commission has chosen to concentrate its efforts on verifying how the themes of inspiration and truth appear in the various texts of the Bible” (April 10, 2010) (<http://visnews-en.blogspot.com/2010/04/plenary-assembly-of-pontifical-biblical.html>).

4 On several occasions, the Pontifical Biblical Commission has spent four or more years studying individual subjects. See the description at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_14071997_pcbible_en.html.

5 In recent years, the commission has indeed published some well-known documents as a result of

teaching on the inspiration and truth of the Bible, since any new document would necessarily rest on the foundation of existing precedents.

The chief documents that set forth the Church's teaching in this area are those of various ecumenical councils: the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, as well as documents from the Councils of Florence, Trent, and Vatican I. Also of importance are the three papal encyclicals on biblical matters—*Providentissimus Deus* of Pope Leo XIII (1893), *Spiritus Paraclitus* of Pope Benedict XV (1920), and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pope Pius XII (1943). In addition, there are several other papal and Vatican curial publications, including the "Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels" (1964) of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, as well as its "Responses" from the early part of the last century.⁶

The first goal of this essay, then, is to provide a review of the magisterial teaching set forth in these documents. Specifically, the following headings having a certain logical order will be considered: inspiration as divine authorship; the inspired human authors; truth or inerrancy as a consequence of inspiration; inerrancy and the salvific purposes of Scripture; biblical truth and biblical interpretation; and the analogy between incarnation and inspiration.⁷ The second goal of this essay is to consider the future prospects by suggesting some ideas that may likely be taken into account or treated in more detail in any new document to be issued on the Bible's inspiration and truth. Such ideas can be adduced by considering the events of the 2008 Synod, recent theological work, and perhaps most especially the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI, including his earlier work as a theologian and as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.⁸ For example, at the

its studies, but this is not always the case. See Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), and Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002). The norms governing the biblical commission, ever since its reorganization by Pope Paul VI in 1971 such that it was no longer an organ of the magisterium but became a consultative body, indicate that its conclusions are "submitted to the Supreme Pontiff before being turned over for the use of the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith." The current commission study of the Bible's inspiration and truth might result, therefore, in a document from the doctrinal congregation or even a papal document sometime in the future. See Pope Paul VI, *Sedula Cura* [The Solicitous Care], Apostolic Letter Issued *Motu Proprio* on New Laws Regulating the Pontifical Biblical Commission (June 27, 1971), 10, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchard (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 149. Hereafter abbreviated SD. Latin text in *Enchiridion Biblicum: Documenti della Chiesa sulla Sacra Scrittura: Edizione bilingue* [Documents of the Church on Sacred Scripture: Bilingual Edition], 2nd ed., ed. Alfio Filippi and Erminio Lora (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1993), 734. Hereafter abbreviated EB and cited by paragraph number.

6 See Béchard's discussion of these early "Responses" in SD, 318–329.

7 These headings basically correspond to the topics and order of treatment in the document of the Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (November 18, 1965), 11–13 (SD, 24–25; EB 686–691).

8 Regarding Pope Benedict's personal interest in the topic, see his Address to the Plenary

level of general principle, one thinks of the pope's emphasis on interpreting the Second Vatican Council, not with a "hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture" but "in the continuity of the one subject-church that the Lord has given to us."⁹ One can imagine that this principle will help to guide the work of those involved in preparing any new document on biblical inspiration and truth.

Inspiration as Divine Authorship

It is helpful to begin by situating the teaching on inspiration within the overall context of the Catholic understanding of revelation, that is, of the revealed Word of God. Ultimately, this revelation is the Word of God incarnate, Jesus Christ.¹⁰ As the young theologian Joseph Ratzinger explained in an essay written during the Second Vatican Council, "We have to reach beyond the positive sources of Scripture and Tradition to their inner source: the revelation, the living Word of God, from which Scripture and Tradition both spring."¹¹ Scripture is a privileged witness to this revelation which is Christ.¹² Indeed, as Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* indicates, Scripture is inspired and hence "expresses in a special way" the revelation of Christ preached by the apostles.¹³ Even if the words of Scripture cannot fully express the infinite Word of God who is Christ, nonetheless the "sacred Scriptures contain the Word of God [Lat.: *verbum Dei continent*], and, because they are inspired [*quia inspiratae*], they truly are the Word of God [*vere verbum Dei sunt*]."¹⁴

Assembly of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 23, 2009), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (April 29, 2009), 3, 5, at 3: "You have gathered . . . to study a very important topic: *Inspiration and Truth of the Bible*. This subject not only concerns theology, but the Church herself. . . . The topic you have addressed furthermore responds to a concern that I have very much at heart, because the interpretation of Sacred Scripture is of capital importance for the Christian faith and for the life of the Church." Also, back in 1999 when Ratzinger was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the congregation sponsored a symposium in order "to be informed more comprehensively about the current situation" regarding "open questions and urgent problems" that remain "regarding the inspiration and truth of the Bible, the canon, the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and the general criteria of Christian biblical interpretation" [emphasis added]. Joseph Ratzinger and Tarcisio Bertone, "Presentation," in *L'Interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa: Atti del Simposio* [The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church: Acts of the Symposium], Atti e Documenti 11 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001), 7–8, at 7.

- 9 Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia (December 22, 2005), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (January 4, 2006), 4–6, at 5.
- 10 John 1:1, 14.
- 11 Joseph Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture—Tradition—Office*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Thomas Söding, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), 41–89, at 50. The quotation is from an essay titled "The Question of the Concept of Tradition: A Provisional Response," originally published in 1965 in a volume co-authored with Karl Rahner.
- 12 Christ "is revelation in the proper sense." Ratzinger, *God's Word*, 56; also, "Scripture bears witness" to "the abiding reality of Christ"; at 57.
- 13 *Dei Verbum*, 8 (SD, 22; EB 679).
- 14 *Dei Verbum*, 24 (SD, 29; EB 704). In *Dei Verbum*, 9, we similarly read that "Sacred Scripture is the utterance of God [Latin: *locutio Dei*] inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the

Of course, as the Council recognized, this Word of God is “spoken through human agents and in human fashion.”¹⁵ We will discuss the human authors of Scripture in the following section, but for now let us consider how the fact of inspiration is associated with the divine authorship of Scripture.¹⁶ The New Testament itself asserts that “all Scripture is inspired” [Gk.: *theopneustos*], that is, literally, “God-breathed.”¹⁷ In the sacred writings, “human beings, moved by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God.”¹⁸ Based on these and other biblical texts,¹⁹ as well as the statements of patristic and medieval writers,²⁰ the Church’s magisterium has often over the centuries referred to the fact of biblical inspiration in terms of divine authorship. The Council of Florence (1442) affirms that “one and the same God is the author of the Old and the New Testament—that is, the Law and the prophets and the Gospel—since the saints of both testaments spoke under the inspiration of the same Spirit.”²¹

A century later, the Council of Trent (1546), takes up the same formulation regarding the divine authorship of the biblical books; however, in response to the challenges of the Reformation, the Council emphasizes also the unwritten traditions. The first decree of the Council’s fourth session states that the Council “accepts and venerates with an equal measure of piety and reverence all the books

inspiration of the divine Spirit [*divino afflante Spiritu*]” (SD, 23; EB 682). Regarding this passage, which also says that sacred Tradition “hands on fully and completely” the Word of God, Ratzinger comments that “only Scripture is defined in terms of what it *is*: it is stated that Scripture is the Word of God consigned to writing. Tradition, however, is described only functionally, in terms of what it *does*: it hands on the Word of God, but is not the Word of God.” Joseph Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, trans. William Glen-Doepel, 5 vols. (New York: Herder, 1969), 3:181–198, at 194.

15 *Dei Verbum*, 12 (SD, 24; EB 688).

16 “God is the author of sacred Scripture.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 105; emphasis in the original.

17 2 Tim. 3:16.

18 2 Pet. 1:20.

19 For a discussion of 2 Tim. 3:14–17; 2 Pet. 1:16–21; and other biblical texts related to biblical inspiration (such as Isa. 34:16; Neh. 9:3, 20; Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 4:25; and Heb. 3:7) and inerrancy (such as John 10:35; Luke 24:44; and Acts 1:16), see Valerio Mannucci, *Bibbia come Parola di Dio: Introduzione Generale alla Sacra Scrittura* [The Bible as Word of God: General Introduction to Sacred Scripture], 17th ed. (Brescia: Queriniana, 2002), 132–134, 246.

20 Still recognized for its thorough treatment of inspiration in the writings of patristic and medieval writers, as well as in the ancient councils, is the classic work, Christiano Pesch, *De Inspiratione Sacrae Scripturae* (Freiburg: Herder, 1906 [1925 reprint]), 38–201.

21 Council of Florence, *Cantate Domino* [Sing Praises to the Lord], Bull of Union with the Copts (February 4, 1442), in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols., ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990), 1:572 (EB 47). Even earlier, at the Second Council of Lyons (1274), in the Profession of Faith of Michael Palaeologus, there is a formula stating that God is the one author of the New and Old Testaments (EB 40). The Greek text here uses the word *archêgos* for “author” (Latin: *auctor*), indicating more clearly that the expression “God is the author of the Scriptures” also means broadly that God is their originator or founder.

of the Old and New Testaments, since the one God is the author of both, together with the traditions concerning both faith and morals.”²²

Against a climate of rationalism, the First Vatican Council (1870) confirmed this teaching of the earlier councils and further developed it by rejecting two false or incomplete theories of inspiration. The Council held that the biblical books are “sacred and canonical, not because, having been composed by simple human industry, they were later approved by her own authority, nor merely because they contain revelation without error, but because, having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit [Lat.: *Spiritu sancto inspirante conscripti*], they have God for their author and were delivered as such to the Church.”²³

The Council thus explains that inspiration is to be understood in terms of divine authorship. Inspiration, which renders the biblical books sacred and canonical, does not mean that the Church subsequently approved books that were written only by human industry.²⁴ Moreover, it is insufficient, although not incorrect, to say that inspiration is a negative assistance against error (as if it were merely a form of infallibility), since inspiration understood as divine authorship also involves a positive influence on the human author.

Vatican I’s teaching on inspiration is doctrinally defined in one of the canons at the end of the document, with an anathema pronounced on “anyone [who] does not receive as sacred and canonical the complete books of the sacred Scripture with all their parts, as the holy synod of Trent enumerated them, or denies that they were divinely inspired.”²⁵ Also notable is the canon’s insistence that inspiration is plenary (“complete books . . . with all their parts”).

Finally, the Second Vatican Council, in *Dei Verbum* (1965), incorporates the teaching of the earlier councils in its own discussion of inspiration as divine authorship:

The divinely revealed truths that are contained and presented in the text of sacred Scripture have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Relying on the faith of the apostolic age, Holy Mother Church holds as sacred and canonical the complete books of the Old and New Testaments, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration

22 Council of Trent, *Decretum Primum: Recipiuntur Libri Sacri et Traditiones Apostolorum* [First Decree: Acceptance of the Sacred Books and Apostolic Traditions] (April 8, 1546) (SD, 3–4, at 3; EB 57).

23 First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius* [The Son of God], Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (April 24, 1870), chap. 2 (SD, 14–17, at 16; EB 77).

24 For some background on the Catholic authors who held the theories rejected by Vatican I, see Raymond F. Collins, “Inspiration,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1023–1033, at 1029.

25 *Dei Filius*, canon 4 (SD, 17; EB 79).

of the Holy Spirit (compare John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19–21; 3:15–16), they have God as their author, and they have been handed on as such to the Church herself.²⁶

Besides listing several supporting biblical citations, *Dei Verbum*, 11, concludes by explicitly quoting 2 Timothy 3:16–17. Summarizing, we could say that “what the New Testament expressed by referring to God-breathed Scripture is achieved by saying: ‘God is the author of Scripture.’”²⁷

Turning to papal and curial teaching on inspiration and divine authorship, we highlight three select documents. First, Leo XIII, in *Providentissimus Deus*, repeated the teaching of Vatican I that inspiration is plenary as he rejected attempts to restrict it in any way: “It is absolutely wrong and forbidden either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of holy Scripture or to admit that the sacred writer has erred”; in particular, “the system of those who . . . do not hesitate to concede that divine inspiration regards the things of faith and morals and nothing beyond . . . cannot be tolerated.”²⁸ Second, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in its declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000), pointed out the uniqueness of the Old and New Testaments as inspired texts:

The Church’s tradition . . . reserves the designation of *inspired texts* to the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, since these are inspired by the Holy Spirit.²⁹

Third, in a 2009 address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Pope Benedict re-emphasized the divine authorship of the Scriptures. Referring to Vatican II, he noted that “the Council recalls first of all that God is the author of sacred

26 *Dei Verbum*, 11 (SD, 24; EB 686). This sentence has a footnote referring, among other things, to the teaching of the First Vatican Council quoted above (EB 77).

27 Richard F. Smith, “Inspiration and Inerrancy,” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 499–514, at 503.

28 Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* [The God of All Providence], Encyclical Letter on the Study of Scripture (November 18, 1893), 40 (SD, 55; EB 124). Leo was writing against the opinions of Catholic authors who had suggested, especially after the definition of papal infallibility at Vatican I, that inspiration and inerrancy should similarly be restricted to faith and morals. See the discussion in Collins, “Inspiration,” 1030; and Antonio M. Artola and José M. Sánchez Caro, *Biblia y Palabra de Dios* [Bible and Word of God], Introducción al Estudio de la Biblia 2 (Estella: Verbo Divino, 1990), 224–225. Later documents, such as the 1907 Decree of the Holy Office *Lamentabili* (EB 200, 202), the encyclical of Benedict XV *Spiritus Paraclitus* (EB 448, 455), and the encyclical of Pius XII *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (EB 538), all refer back to the teaching of Vatican I and Pope Leo on the plenary character of inspiration and on inspiration as divine authorship.

29 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* [The Lord Jesus], Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 8.

Scripture”; he went on to reiterate that the Holy Spirit is “the invisible and transcendent Author.”³⁰

It is helpful to note that this teaching on the inspiration of Scripture, including the understanding of inspiration as divine authorship, is a teaching of the highest level of authority, on account of the doctrinal definition of Vatican I. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has explained, such teachings are doctrines “of divine and catholic faith which the Church proposes as divinely and formally revealed and, as such, as irreformable.”³¹ Thus, any future document will undoubtedly reiterate this teaching. At the same time, a future document will likely explain further what is meant by saying that God is the “author” of Scripture. For example, to speak of the divine author and the human authors of Scripture is to speak using *analogy*; in this analogy, however, God’s authorship has priority (as the “primary analogate”). As St. Thomas Aquinas explained, this is because God as author can “signify his meaning, not by words only (as man also can do), but also by things themselves.”³² God’s authorship thus also includes the very events of salvation history.

The Nature of Inspiration: Scripture’s Human Authors

In *Dei Verbum*, after the statement on divine authorship quoted above, there is a statement about the inspired human authors:

In composing the sacred books, God chose and employed certain men who, while engaged in this task, made full use of their faculties and powers so that, with God himself acting in them and through them, they as true authors [*veri auctores*] committed to writing everything and only those things that he wanted written.³³

30 Pope Benedict XVI, Address (April 23, 2009), 3.

31 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the *Professio Fidei*” (June 29, 1998), 5, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (July 15, 1998), 3–4, at 3. Text also in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 90 (1998): 549. Hereafter abbreviated AAS; available online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/aas/index_sp.htm. For a discussion of exactly what falls under the dogmatic definition of Vatican I, see Artola and Sánchez Caro, *Biblia*, 144–145.

32 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, pt. 1a, q. 1, art. 10. Text in *Summa Theologica*, 3 vols. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), 1:7. See also the *Catechism*, no. 117: “Thanks to the unity of God’s plan, not only the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs.”

33 *Dei Verbum*, 11 (SD, 24; EB 686).

This statement clarifies that the human authors of Scripture are not merely secretaries but true authors who write using all of their abilities but who nevertheless write only those things God wanted written.³⁴

The emphasis in *Dei Verbum* on the human authors as *veri auctores* caps a development seen in the documents leading up to Vatican II. Earlier papal statements, using the scholastic terminology of instrumental causality, speak of God as the principal cause of the Scriptures, with the sacred author as his instrument. For example, Leo writes, in a passage that also discusses inerrancy:

Hence, because the Holy Spirit employed men as his instruments, we cannot therefore say that it was these inspired instruments, who, perchance, have fallen into error, and not the primary author. For, by supernatural power, God so moved and impelled them to write—he was so present to them—that the things which he ordered, and those only, they, first, rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth. Otherwise, it could not be said that God was the author of the entire Scripture.³⁵

Benedict XV, in describing St. Jerome's teaching on inspiration, also uses the language of instrumentality; nonetheless he also affirms that, according to Jerome, "the individual authors of these books worked in full freedom under the divine afflatus, each of them in accordance with his individual nature and character. . . . Each of them uses his own gifts and powers," so that one can speak of a "partnership of God and man [*Dei cum homine communitatem*]."³⁶ Pius XII emphasizes that the sacred author, as an instrument of the Holy Spirit, is a "living and reasonable" instrument, in keeping with human nature. He indicates therefore that the interpreter should "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."³⁷

34 Thus, a "verbal dictation" theory of inspiration is rejected. In this regard, the Catholic understanding of inspiration differs, for example, from a Muslim understanding; see Ralph Del Colle, "Inspiration and Inerrancy in Scripture," *Chicago Studies* 47 (2008): 25–38, at 35–36. Several older magisterial texts have in fact used the Latin verb *dictare* to refer to biblical inspiration (and to oral traditions as well), but the Latin verb has a broader range of meaning than the English "dictate"; see the discussion in Mannucci, *Bibbia*, 156.

35 Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 41 (SD, 55–56; EB 125).

36 Pope Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus* [The Holy Spirit, the Comforter], Encyclical Letter Commemorating the Fifteenth Centenary of the Death of St. Jerome (September 15, 1920), 3 (SD, 84; EB 448).

37 Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [Inspired by the Divine Spirit], Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies (September 30, 1943), 19 (SD, 128; EB 556–557).

Thus the stage was set for the further step in *Dei Verbum*, with its mention of the human authors as “true authors.” The language of instrumentality is avoided,³⁸ at least in part to leave open the possibilities for further theological reflection in the future.³⁹ The Council’s terminology has been repeated various times in subsequent years.⁴⁰ For instance, Pope Benedict has referred to the divine and human authors of Scripture by speaking of a “divine-human synergy . . . God really speaks to men and women in a human way.”⁴¹

Regarding the nature of inspiration and Scripture’s divine and human authorship, one possible area for development in a future document regards the role of the Church.⁴² Already prior to the Council, Karl Rahner theorized about inspiration in connection with the apostolic Church;⁴³ however, he did so in such a way that the Scriptures seemed to be unduly subordinated.⁴⁴ In his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict offers a more promising reflection, pointing out the mutual relationship between Scripture and Church:

At this point we get a glimmer, even on the historical level, of what inspiration means: The author does not speak as a private, self-contained subject. He speaks in a living community. . . . One

38 See the synoptic presentation of the various schemas of *Dei Verbum*, with the proposed emendations for this section, in Francisco Gil Hellín, ed., *Concilio Vaticano II Synopsis: Constitutio Dogmatica de Divina Revelatione Dei Verbum* [Vatican II Synopsis: The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*] (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 88–89.

39 For interesting background, see Jared Wicks, “Six Texts by Prof. Joseph Ratzinger as *Peritus* Before and During Vatican Council II,” *Gregorianum* 89 (2008): 233–311, at 277–280 (302–305 for the original German). The young Ratzinger, in a lecture given in Rome to German-speaking bishops on October 10, 1962, the eve of the opening of the Council, critiqued the preparatory schema on revelation on this point, recommending that the Council “refrain from describing in detail the process of inspiration” (at 278) and avoid “dogmatically defining” any theory, thus leaving “the way open for further thinking” (at 279). For the text of the preparatory schema on inspiration (which incorporated passages from the encyclicals of Popes Leo XIII and Pius XII), see Gil Hellín, *Synopsis*, 183.

40 For example, see Pope John Paul II, Address Commemorating the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of *Dei Verbum* (December 14, 1990), 4 (*SD*, 164–165). See also the *Catechism*, no. 106.

41 Benedict XVI, Address (April 23, 2009).

42 For a discussion of various approaches to inspiration, see Walter Vogels, “Three Possible Models of Inspiration,” in *Scrittura ispirata: Atti del Simposio Internazionale sull’Ispirazione* [Inspired Scripture: Acts of the International Symposium on Inspiration], ed. Antonio Izquierdo, *Atti e Documenti* 16 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 61–79.

43 Karl Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 2nd ed., trans. Charles H. Henkey and Martin Palmer, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 1 (New York: Herder, 1964), 53: “The inspiration of holy Scripture is nothing else than God’s founding of the Church, inasmuch as this applies to precisely that constitutive element of the apostolic Church which is the Bible.”

44 See the discussion in James T. Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810: A Review and Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1969), 254–255.

could say that the books of Scripture involve three interacting subjects.⁴⁵

Thus, in addition to the human authors and God, Benedict refers to the “collective subject, the ‘People of God.’ . . . The People of God—the Church—is the living subject of Scripture; it is in the Church that the words of the Bible are always in the present.”⁴⁶ What we see here is a reflection on inspiration that takes into account the broader “dialogical” understanding of revelation that was advanced at the time of Vatican II. We will return to consider this ecclesial understanding of inspiration further below, in our discussion of biblical interpretation.

Can Error Coexist with Inspiration?

Closely connected to the Church’s teaching on biblical inspiration is its teaching on the truth and inerrancy of Scripture. In general, this means that the intended affirmations of Scripture are without error. Scripture’s truth and inerrancy are often explained deductively—as a consequence or effect of its inspiration. This deductive argument appears rather simple: if the Scriptures are inspired such that God is their author then it follows that they “teach the truth.”⁴⁷ For example, consider how *Dei Verbum* presents the deduction; after stating that the human authors are “true authors” who “committed to writing everything and only those things that [God] wanted written,” the text continues:

Therefore, since [*Cum ergo*] everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers should be regarded as asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that [*inde*] we must acknowledge the books of Scripture as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error the truth that God wished to be recorded in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.⁴⁸

If we compare this statement with *Providentissimus Deus*, we certainly note some significant differences (to which we will return shortly), but the basic deductive argument that reasons from inspiration to truth and inerrancy is the same.

And so far is it from being possible that any error can coexist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the Supreme

45 Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xx.

46 Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xxi.

47 *Catechism*, no. 107: “The inspired books teach the truth.”

48 *Dei Verbum*, 11 (SD, 24; EB 687).

Truth, can utter that which is not true. This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church, solemnly defined in the Councils of Florence and of Trent, and finally confirmed and more expressly formulated by the Council of the Vatican.⁴⁹

It is interesting to note that Pope Leo understands inerrancy to be first, a consequence of inspiration (inspiration “excludes and rejects” error), and second, a truth of faith (“the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church”).⁵⁰ These two ideas were confirmed in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s 1998 commentary on the new formula for the *Professio Fidei*, the public profession of faith required of those who hold certain offices of Church governance or who teach subjects dealing with faith and morals in universities and seminaries.

The congregation’s commentary first discusses the order of the truths specified by the three propositions found at the conclusion of the Profession of Faith—first, truths contained in the Word of God which the Church sets forth to be believed as divinely revealed; second, truths on faith and morals set forth by the Church as to be held definitively; and third, sure teachings which have not been defined or proposed as definitive, but which nonetheless require the religious submission of will and intellect. The congregation then lists examples of these truths, including one regarding the inerrancy of Scripture—“the absence of error in the inspired sacred texts [*absentia erroris in scriptis sacris inspiratis*].” The congregation asserts this to be among the truths of the first order—that is, a truth that is to be believed as divinely revealed.⁵¹

49 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 40–41 (SD, 55; EB 124–125). The first sentence of this quotation (EB 124) is one of the texts given in the footnote to the statement in *Dei Verbum*, 11, just quoted. The deductive logic is also evident in a phrase that follows shortly thereafter: “Those who maintain that an error is possible in any genuine passage of the sacred writings either pervert the Catholic notion of inspiration or make God the author of such error” (*Providentissimus Deus*, 41; SD, 56; EB 126; which is also cited in the same footnote in *Dei Verbum*, 11).

50 Later documents make the same two points. For example, Benedict XV notes first that “Jerome further shows that the immunity of Scripture from error or deception is necessarily bound up with its divine inspiration and supreme authority. He says . . . that it was taught him as the doctrine of the Fathers and generally received” (Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 5 [SD, 86; EB 450]). Second, he says that “St. Jerome’s teaching on this point serves to confirm and illustrate what our predecessor of happy memory, Leo XIII, declared to be the ancient and traditional belief of the Church touching the absolute immunity of Scripture from error” (*Spiritus Paraclitus*, 5 [SD, 87; EB 452]). Similarly, Pius XII quotes the just-cited passage of *Providentissimus Deus*, and then comments: “This teaching, which our predecessor Leo XIII set forth with such solemnity, we also proclaim with our authority” (Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 4 [SD, 117; EB 540]).

51 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Commentary,” 11; AAS 90 (1998): 549. To better appreciate this statement, it is instructive to review the whole list of examples given in the commentary for truths of the first order: “the articles of faith of the Creed; the various christological dogmas and Marian dogmas; the doctrine of the institution of the sacraments by Christ and their efficacy with regard to grace; the doctrine of the real and substantial presence of

Thus the commentary affirms that the inerrancy of Scripture is a truth of faith. Moreover, the commentary's footnote refers precisely to the two texts we have just considered—from *Providentissimus Deus* and *Dei Verbum*—thus implicitly confirming that the inerrancy of Scripture is a consequence of inspiration. The juxtaposition of these two texts also suggests that they should be read in continuity with one another. Hence, even before considering to what exactly the teaching on biblical inerrancy and truth extends and how to apply it, we must understand it as a truth of faith that follows as a consequence of the dogma of inspiration.

The theological manuals written prior to Vatican II make similar points,⁵² as do various biblical scholars writing during and after the Council,⁵³ thus confirming the consistent argument in magisterial documents that the truth or inerrancy of Scripture follows necessarily from its inspiration.

Inerrancy and the Salvific Purposes of Scripture

Given this seemingly settled tradition of understanding, it is somewhat surprising that the *Instrumentum Laboris* or working document of the 2008 Synod of Bishops expressed a different relationship between inspiration and inerrancy. Indeed, the working document appeared to understand inerrancy as somehow restricted. Instead of saying, "therefore, since" Scripture is inspired, "it follows that" it teaches the truth, the translated Latin text says that "although [*quamvis*] all parts of Sacred

Christ in the Eucharist and the sacrificial nature of the eucharistic celebration; the foundation of the Church by the will of Christ; the doctrine on the primacy and infallibility of the Roman Pontiff; the doctrine on the existence of original sin; the doctrine on the immortality of the spiritual soul and on the immediate recompense after death; the absence of error in the inspired sacred texts; the doctrine on the grave immorality of direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being."

52 See, for example, Sebastianus Tromp, *De Sacrae Scripturae Inspiratione* [The Inspiration of Sacred Scripture], 6th ed. (Rome: Gregorian University, 1962), 113, 120–124.

53 For example, during the Council and in reference specifically to the Gospels, Joseph Fitzmyer wrote that the "evangelists were inspired by the Holy Spirit to compile and write down the accounts as they did. This inspiration guarantees their Gospel truth, which is free from error. . . . The consequence of inspiration is inerrancy, that is, immunity from formal error in what is affirmed." Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Biblical Commission's Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels," *Theological Studies* 25 (1964): 386–408, at 401. Fitzmyer then explains, like Pius XII before him, that the truth of Scripture has to be understood in light of the literary genres found in the Bible: "There is poetical truth as well as historical truth, rhetorical truth as well as legal truth, mythical truth as well as the Gospel truth." See also Luis Alonso Schökel, *The Inspired Word: Scripture in the Light of Language and Literature*, trans. Francis Martin (New York: Herder, 1965), 324–325: "The principle of inerrancy is easy to understand: God cannot be deceived, nor can he deceive us. If God proposes something in the Scriptures, it is true and cannot be false. . . . The deduction is simple. God has spoken, and God cannot utter falsehood. It does no good to take refuge in the distinction between the divine and the human in the Scriptures; the truth is divine, the error human—such a distinction has no basis in the nature of the inspired text." While Alonso Schökel wrote this book before the promulgation of *Dei Verbum*, its later 1986 edition (in Spanish) nonetheless leaves this part essentially unchanged: see *La Palabra Inspirada: La Biblia a la Luz de la Ciencia del Language*, 3rd ed., Academia Christiana 27 (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1986), 313–314.

Scripture are inspired, yet [*tamen*] its inerrancy refers only [*tantummodo*] to 'the truth, which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to be recorded in the sacred writings.'"⁵⁴

It was on account of this statement that a discussion over inerrancy arose at the Synod,⁵⁵ and as a result, that the final proposition quoted at the beginning of this essay was formulated. It is interesting to note, however, that in his address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, delivered six months after the Synod, Pope Benedict follows *Dei Verbum* very closely, rather than the formulation in the *Instrumentum Laboris*:

Therefore, since all that the inspired authors or hagiographers state is to be considered as said by the Holy Spirit, the invisible and transcendent Author, it must consequently be acknowledged that "the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures."⁵⁶

From another perspective, the statement advancing a "restricted inerrancy" view is not surprising given the theological discussion that has taken place since Vatican II regarding how to interpret paragraph 11 of *Dei Verbum*, and especially the meaning of the phrase "for the sake of our salvation."

For example, some have asserted the need for the Church to move beyond the supposedly "aprioristic and unhistorical thinking that has dominated teaching on inerrancy since the age of the Fathers."⁵⁷ Indeed, some have gone so far as to

54 Synod of Bishops, "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," *Instrumentum Laboris* (May 11, 2008), 15(c) (Lat.: "Quamvis omnes Sacrae Scripturae partes divinitus inspiratae sint, tamen eius inerrantia pertinet tantummodo ad 'veritatem, quam Deus nostrae salutis causa Litteris Sacris consignari voluit'" [*Dei Verbum*, 11]), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (June 25, 2008), I–XV, at V, although the translation there is faulty. (The translation above is my own.) Compare Brian W. Harrison, "Does Vatican Council II Allow for Errors in Sacred Scripture?" *Divinitas* 52 (2009): 279–304.

55 "There's an interesting discussion about the inerrancy of the Bible. There's long been debate in Catholicism between 'restricted inerrancy,' which holds that only some portions of the Bible are free from error (usually understood as that which concerns salvation), and 'unrestricted inerrancy,' meaning that everything in the Bible is true, although in the sense of truth which the Bible itself intends." John Allen, "Synod on the Bible: Shaping the Imaginations of 1.2 Billion Catholics" [Online Edition] (October 10, 2008) (<http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/synod-bible-shaping-imaginations-12-billion-catholics>). Compare Allen, "The Synod on the Bible Looks for Middle Ground," [Online Edition] (October 17, 2008): "Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, widely seen as one of the leading thinkers at the senior levels of the Church, said in an interview this week that the second option [the 'unrestricted inerrancy' option] better represents 'where we're at today,' but acknowledged that the issue hasn't been resolved" (<http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/synod-bible-looks-middle-ground-poignant-press-conference>).

56 Benedict XVI, Address (April 23, 2009).

57 Alois Grillmeier, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Chapter III: The Divine

suggest that “at Vatican II the Catholic Church ‘turned the corner’ in the inerrancy question by moving from the *a priori* toward the *a posteriori* in the statement of *Dei Verbum* 11.”⁵⁸ In other words, rather than argue in an *a priori* and deductive way from Scripture’s inspiration to its truth and inerrancy, one should take stock of the difficulties in the Bible and then come up with a properly limited understanding of the Bible’s inerrancy and truth.

In this regard, the interventions of various Council fathers, most famously Cardinal Franz König of Vienna, are recalled, in which examples of “errors” in Scripture were set forth.⁵⁹ As a result, Raymond Brown and others have argued that Vatican II taught a limited view of inerrancy—not a quantitative limit, “but a qualitative one whereby all Scripture is inerrant to the extent that it serves the purpose for which God intended it. Recognition of this type of limitation is implicit in the statement made at Vatican II.”⁶⁰ Brown concedes, however, that this view still faces “the problem of finding a criterion: How exactly does one know what God wanted put into the Scriptures for the sake of our salvation?”⁶¹ It should be noticed that, given such a criterion, one is back to the *a priori* and deductive argument, the only difference being that the lines have been redrawn. In other words, if one holds to any form of inerrancy, at some point the *a priori* and deductive argument will be invoked.

As for the proper interpretation of the phrase “for the sake of our salvation,” it is helpful to recall that the penultimate schema or draft of *Dei Verbum*, 11, instead spoke of “saving truth” (*veritatem salutare*), in order to make reference also to the events of salvation history. Many Council fathers expressed concerns about this terminology, as it appeared to restrict inerrancy to matters of faith and

Inspiration and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture,” in Vorgrimler, *Commentary*, 3:199–246, at 206.

58 Raymond E. Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 18. Brown goes on to say that “the statement is not without an ambiguity that stems from the compromise nature of *Dei Verbum*. . . . The result is often a juxtaposition of conservative older formulations with more open recent formulations.” On this point, Pope Benedict’s comments regarding the proper hermeneutic of continuity for interpreting the Council can be helpful for moving the discussion forward: “The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council. It claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the Council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts.” Benedict XVI, Address (December 22, 2005).

59 On König’s intervention, see the discussion in Grillmeier, “Chapter III,” 3:205–210.

60 Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 31. For a recent critique of this position, see Denis Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation: A Theological Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2010), 187, 230, 232–233, 238.

61 Brown, *Introduction*, 31.

morals, an idea that, as we have seen, was condemned by Leo XIII. The doctrinal commission overseeing the drafting process was of the opinion that this terminology did not introduce any “material limitation” to the truth of Scripture, but rather indicated its “formal specification.”⁶² The matter was brought to the attention of Pope Paul VI, who, sharing the concern of the Council fathers, asked the doctrinal commission to consider omitting the expression, in part because it could be open to wrong interpretation.⁶³ After Cardinal Augustin Bea, a trusted adviser of the Pope, explained the matter to the commission, it voted to drop the adjective “saving” and replace it with the clause “for the sake of our salvation.” This clause went on to become part of the definitive text.⁶⁴

The end result, it appears, can be summed up in the following words from a contemporary textbook: “A limitation on biblical truth is something which Catholic tradition has wished to avoid by every means.”⁶⁵ Of course, along with

62 See Giovanni Caprile, “Tre Emendamenti allo Schema sulla Rivelazione: Appunti per la Storia del Testo” [Three Amendments to the Schema on Revelation: Notes for the History of the Text], *La Civiltà Cattolica* 117 (1966): 214–231, at 224; see also Gil Hellín, *Synopsis*, 90–91. An English translation of the commission’s Latin explanation is found in Harrison, “Vatican Council II,” 288: “This expression does *not* imply any *material limitation* to the truth of Scripture, rather, it indicates Scripture’s *formal specification*, the nature of which must be kept in mind in deciding in what sense everything *affirmed* in the Bible is true—not only matters of faith and morals and facts bound up with the history of salvation” (emphasis in Latin original).

63 Caprile, “Tre Emendamenti,” 226. See also Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration*, 186, 229.

64 Cardinal Bea explains the meaning of the phrase in his commentary on *Dei Verbum*. “Now we must consider whether the ‘truth’ (that is, the truth “which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation”) implies some limit set to the inerrancy of Scripture, meaning that it taught ‘without error’ not everything that it asserts but only all that concerns our salvation (or those things also which closely and directly affect our salvation). . . . Our question, therefore, about the possible existence of a limit set to inerrancy refers, not to the events in which God truly reveals himself, but to those events which form their historical setting, and which Scripture frequently describes in great detail. Does the inerrancy asserted in this document cover also the account of these historical events? In other words, is the historical background also described ‘without error’? . . . For my own part I think that this question must be answered affirmatively, that is, that these ‘background’ events also are described without error. In fact, we declare in general that there is no limit set to this inerrancy, and that it applies to all that the inspired writer, and therefore all that the Holy Spirit by his means, affirms. . . . If therefore the Council had wished to introduce here a new conception, different from that presented in these recent documents of the supreme teaching authority, which reflects the beliefs of the early fathers, it would have had to state this clearly and explicitly. Let us now ask whether there may be any indications to suggest such a restricted interpretation of inerrancy. The answer is decidedly negative. There is not the slightest sign of any such indication. On the contrary everything points against a restrictive interpretation. . . . In fact, the phrasing we now have does not admit of any such interpretation, because the idea of salvation is no longer directly linked with the noun ‘truth’, but with the verbal expression ‘wanted put into the sacred writings’; in other words, the phrase in which the text speaks of salvation explains God’s purpose in causing the Scriptures to be written, and not the nature of the truth enshrined therein.” Augustin Cardinal Bea, *The Word of God and Mankind*, trans. Dorothy White (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1967), 189–191. Brown, *Critical Meaning*, 19, n. 22, finds Bea’s explanation to be a “much more conservative interpretation” than his own.

65 Artola and Sánchez Caro, *Biblia*, 231 (my translation).

statements avoiding a limitation on biblical truth, there have been various magisterial statements which provide principles for how it should be interpreted. Before turning to these statements in the next section, one final point can be considered here, namely, the emphasis in *Dei Verbum*, 11, on the “truth” of Scripture rather than on its “inerrancy.”

The emphasis on the inerrancy of Scripture in the pre-conciliar period was the result, in part, of the necessity of defending the Bible against rationalist and modernist criticism.⁶⁶ It was also due to the “noetic” emphasis of the neo-scholastic theology that characterized the manuals of that period. Revelation was understood as the communication of a set of truths; these truths could be formulated as propositions which then demanded the assent of faith.⁶⁷ Within this framework, it is not surprising that there was an emphasis on the inerrant character of the propositions revealed in Scripture. As we have seen, at Vatican II there was a development in the understanding of revelation: God reveals not merely propositions demanding assent, but reveals himself. Christ is the revelation of the Father; thus, revelation is not only propositional but also personal, not only informational but relational. Given this bigger picture regarding the understanding of revelation, there similarly is a bigger picture in which to situate the understanding of inerrancy.⁶⁸ Indeed, the Council sought to indicate this larger context by speaking, beginning in the

66 See Alonso Schökel, *Inspired Word*, 311: “Toward the end of the last century [19th century], the arms of the enemy were directed against the supposed errors of the Bible in an effort to force a breach and enter the sanctuary of inspiration in order to destroy it. The Bible had to be defended; and this is the time when our manuals on inspiration were conceived and constructed. It is not strange, then, that they were surrounded by such great walls of arguments and replies in those sections which dealt with inerrancy. It would be disrespectful and unfitting to dismantle these walls, which still have a function, but we must stop to consider whether or not the wall is the essence of the city, or whether peaceful habitation of the city is not something more important.”

67 Aidan Nichols, in his study of the foremost neo-scholastic theologian of the first half of the twentieth-century, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, presents Garrigou-Lagrange’s definition of revelation as the “[f]ree and essentially supernatural divine agency, by which God . . . manifested religious truths . . . in such a way that subsequently they can be infallibly proposed by the Church.” Aidan Nichols, *Reason with Piety: Garrigou-Lagrange in the Service of Catholic Thought* (Naples, FL: Sapientia, 2008), 34–35, quoting Garrigou-Lagrange, *De Revelatione per Ecclesiam Catholicam Proposita* [Revelation Declared through the Catholic Church]. Contrast this view with what Tracey Rowland writes about Joseph Ratzinger’s understanding of revelation: “For Ratzinger, revelation is not a collection of statements—revelation is Christ himself.” Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 49.

68 Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith*, 51, further explains Ratzinger’s understanding of revelation: “The purpose of this dialogue between God and the human person is not so much the transmission of information but rather the transformation of the person in the life of the Trinity. For Ratzinger this is not a matter of removing the intellectual component of faith but understanding it as a component in a wider whole.”

third of the five schemas (including the preparatory schema),⁶⁹ of the “truth” of Scripture, rather than its inerrancy.⁷⁰

Biblical Truth and the Interpretation of the Bible

Stating the principle of the Bible’s inerrancy and truth is relatively easy, but applying it is more difficult, as we have already suggested.⁷¹ Thus, ever since the time of Pope Leo XIII, there have been magisterial statements that explain how biblical truth and inerrancy are to be understood. These statements are the necessary complement to the statements considered above that resist the restriction of biblical truth. They not only are of assistance in explaining various difficulties encountered in the Bible, but they also refer to various principles of biblical interpretation, which, from the perspective of a Catholic hermeneutic, are important to grasp so as not to fall into a fundamentalist understanding of inerrancy.⁷²

First, Leo explained how the Bible should be understood with regard to the truths of natural science. Quoting St. Augustine, Leo writes:

“The Holy Spirit . . . did not intend to teach men these things (that is to say, the essential nature of the things of the visible universe), things in no way profitable to salvation.” Hence they did not seek to penetrate the secrets of nature, but rather described and dealt with things in more or less figurative language, or in terms which were commonly used at the time and that in many instances are in daily use at this day.⁷³

69 For a synopsis and explanation of the five schemas of this part of the document, see, for example, Mannucci, *Bibbia*, 252–258. On the positive formulation using the word “truth,” Mannucci writes that “the Bible is the book of God, not because it is without error, but because it teaches without error the Truth of God” (at 255; my translation). For a Latin synopsis for this part, see Gil Hellín, *Synopsis*, 90–93.

70 Alonso Schökel, *Inspired Word*, 324: “No part of the Bible contains error. . . . This is the significance of the negative formula, ‘inerrancy.’ And though it is universally applicable to the Bible, it presupposes a very restricted view of biblical truth. It has the advantage of all such specific formulas of being precise, but the danger begins when it is allowed to dominate the whole consideration of truth in the Bible, thus reducing the Scriptures to a catalogue of formal propositions. . . . In order to avoid this, we must put the question of inerrancy in the larger context of the truth of the Bible. Then the negative universality and precision of the term ‘inerrancy’ will work to best advantage.”

71 Alonso Schökel, *Inspired Word*, 325: “The general principle which follows quite simply from the veracity of God, can get quite complicated when we start to apply it.”

72 See the critique of fundamentalist interpretation in Pontifical Biblical Commission, *On the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Sec. I, Par. F. (SD, 244–317, at 273–275; EB 1381–1390).

73 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 39 (SD, 54; EB 121), citing Augustine, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis* (bk. 2, chap. 9). This quotation of Augustine, which makes reference to salvation, is cited in *Dei Verbum*, 11, in the footnote accompanying the phrase “for the sake of our salvation.”

Hence, one should not consider as errors expressions used to describe things as they appear to the senses (for example, the sun rising).⁷⁴ Pope Leo also explained that the principle set forth with regard to natural sciences would also “apply to cognate sciences and especially to history.”⁷⁵

This last statement led some scholars, including Marie-Joseph Lagrange, to raise questions regarding the kinds of history recorded in the Bible. In 1905, a decree of the Pontifical Biblical Commission responded to this historical question, addressing whether it may be admitted “that those books of sacred Scripture regarded as historical . . . sometimes narrate what is not history properly so-called and objectively true, but only have the appearance of history.” The commission gave a nuanced reply: “Negative, except in the case . . . when it can be proved . . . that the sacred writer intended not to give a true and strict history but to set forth, under the guise and form of history, a parable or an allegory or some meaning distinct from the strictly literal or historical sense of the words.”⁷⁶

This response, with its focus on the intention of the sacred author and the kind of literature involved, anticipates what Pius XII says in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* regarding the importance of discovering the literal sense and of determining the literary genre. On the literal sense, he writes “that the supreme rule of interpretation is to discover and define what the writer intended to express”⁷⁷; regarding literary genres, “the Catholic commentator . . . should also make a prudent use of this means, determining, that is, to what extent the manner of expression or the literary mode adopted by the sacred writer may lead to a correct and genuine interpretation.”⁷⁸ Thus, for Pius, critical study of the Bible and the defense and explanation of the Bible’s inerrancy go together:

Not infrequently . . . when some persons reproachfully charge the sacred writers with some historical error or inaccuracy in the recording of facts, on close examination it turns out to be nothing else than those customary modes of expression and narration peculiar to the ancients.⁷⁹

74 Apparently, Brown does not see much of a distinction between interpreting inerrancy and limiting inerrancy. Hence, he asserts that “Pope Leo XIII . . . excluded natural or scientific matters from biblical inerrancy, even if he did this through the expedient of insisting that statements made about nature according to ordinary appearances were not errors.” Brown, *Critical Meaning*, 15.

75 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 40 (SD, 54; EB 123).

76 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Response Concerning the Narratives in the Historical Books of Sacred Scripture Which Have Only the Appearance of Being Historical* (June 23, 1905) (SD, 188; EB 161). See also Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 6 (SD, 89–90; EB 456–460), who responds to this question rather strongly, reflecting the controversies of the anti-Modernist period.

77 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 19 (SD, 128; EB 557).

78 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 21 (SD, 129; EB 560).

79 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 21 (SD, 130; EB 560).

The Pontifical Biblical Commission further addressed the question of history with regard to biblical truth and inerrancy in its “Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels” (1964). This was another landmark document advocating appropriate use of historical-critical methods by Catholic biblical scholars. With regard to the gospels, the instruction states that “the truth of the narrative is not affected in the slightest by the fact that the evangelists report the sayings or the doings of our Lord in a different order, and that they use different words to express what he said, not keeping to the very letter, but nevertheless preserving the sense.”⁸⁰ The instruction also reaffirms the Church’s teaching on inspiration and inerrancy by advising the exegete to “bear in mind . . . that the gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it was he who preserved their authors immune from every error.”⁸¹ As did *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, the instruction sees the proper use of the historical-critical method and a legitimate freedom for the Catholic biblical scholar as compatible with the Church’s traditional doctrine on inerrancy.

Returning to *Dei Verbum*, 11, we can situate the principle that the Scriptures were written “for the sake of our salvation” in the same context as the principles we have just reviewed. Rather than introduce a limitation, the phrase “for the sake of our salvation” provides help both for understanding inerrancy correctly and for interpreting the text correctly, as it reminds us of the purpose for which God had the Scriptures written.

In its next paragraph, however, *Dei Verbum* has still more to say regarding the relationship between biblical truth and biblical interpretation:

To determine the intention of the sacred writers, one must attend to such things as ‘literary forms’ [*genera litteraria*]. For truth is differently presented and expressed in various types of historical writings, in prophetic or poetic texts, or in other modes of speech.⁸²

By advising the interpreter to pay attention to literary genres and to the circumstances of the historical time-period in which the biblical texts were written, this paragraph, like previous documents, refers to various scholarly methods of biblical interpretation. The interpretive task does not end, however, with the application of such methods. Indeed, the document continues by proposing a further interpretive principle: “Sacred Scripture must also be read and interpreted in the light of the

80 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* [Holy Mother Church], Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels (April 21, 1964), IX (SD, 227–235, at 231; EB 651). On this point, see also *Dei Verbum*, 19 (SD, 28; EB 698): the Evangelists “related to us an honest and true account of Jesus” so that “we might know ‘the truth’ concerning the things about which we have been instructed” (citing Luke 1:2–4).

81 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, XI (SD, 232; EB 653).

82 *Dei Verbum*, 12 (SD, 25; EB 689).

same Spirit by whom it was written.”⁸³ Three criteria which the interpreter should take into account are then indicated for implementing this principle: “the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, . . . the entire living tradition of the Church and the analogy of faith.”⁸⁴ In particular, the first of these criteria corresponds to “canonical exegesis,”⁸⁵ and so the question can be asked, again linking biblical truth and biblical interpretation as was done with other principles, whether a canonical perspective can shed some light on biblical truth.⁸⁶ It would not be surprising if the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s current study of inspiration and truth explores this subject further.

Pope Benedict XVI himself takes up another one of the criteria, that of paying attention to how a passage is read within the living Tradition of the whole Church. Drawing on the common patristic and medieval teaching that distinguishes the literal and the spiritual senses, the Pope in *Jesus of Nazareth* explains that while the interpreter must seek “to discover the precise sense the words were intended to convey at their time and place of origin,”⁸⁷ it is also necessary

to keep in mind that any human utterance of a certain weight contains more than the author may have been immediately aware of at the time. When a word transcends the moment in which it is spoken, it carries within itself a “deeper value.” This “deeper value” pertains most of all to words that have matured in the course of faith-history. For in this case the author is not simply speaking for himself on his own authority. He is speaking from the perspective of a common history that sustains him and that already implicitly contains the possibilities of its future, of the further stages of its journey. The process of continually rereading and drawing out new meanings from words would not have been possible unless the words themselves were already open to it from within. At this point we get a glimmer, even on

83 *Dei Verbum*, 12 (SD, 25; EB 690).

84 *Dei Verbum*, 12 (SD, 25; EB 690). These three criteria are repeated in the *Catechism*, nos. 112–114, and Benedict XVI frequently makes reference to them.

85 Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Synod of Bishops (October 14, 2008), in *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (October 22, 2008), 13: “One must interpret the text taking into consideration the unity of all of Scripture. Today this is called canonical exegesis; at the time of the Council this term did not yet exist, but the Council expressed the same thing: it is necessary to take into account the unity of the entirety of Scripture.” See also Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xviii–xix.

86 Two attempts to understand the truth of Scripture in light of the canon are found in Mannucci, *Bibbia*, 246, 264–271; and Giancarlo Biguzzi, “Il Problema della Verità Biblica nel Nuovo Testamento” [The Problem of Biblical Truth in the New Testament], in Izquierdo, *Scrittura Ispirata*, 233–248.

87 Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xix.

the historical level, of what *inspiration* means. The author does not speak as a private, self-contained subject. He speaks in a living community, that is to say, in a living historical movement not created by him, nor even by the collective, but which is led forward by a greater power that is at work. There are dimensions of the word that the old doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture pinpointed with remarkable accuracy. The four senses of Scripture are not individual meanings arrayed side by side, but dimensions of the one word that reaches beyond the moment.⁸⁸

From this point, the Pope goes on to explain that in addition to speaking about the divine author and the human authors of Scripture, we should also speak of the collective subject “People of God” as author in some sense, as “the deeper ‘author’ of the Scriptures.”⁸⁹ “The People of God—the Church—is the living subject of Scripture; it is in the Church that the words of the Bible are always in the present.”⁹⁰ This living subject of the Church is always guided by the “Spirit of truth . . . into all the truth.”⁹¹ First, during the period of the oral preaching of the Gospel message up to the time of the writing of the gospels, the Holy Spirit guides the “remembering” of the apostles and the early Church,⁹² so that the four written gospels, “whose historicity the Church affirms without hesitation, faithfully hand on what Jesus . . . actually did and taught for their eternal salvation.”⁹³ Second,

88 Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xix–xx (emphasis added). On the four senses of Scripture, see the *Catechism*, nos. 115–118.

89 Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xxi.

90 Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xxi.

91 John 16:13.

92 See John 2:22; 12:16; 14:26.

93 *Dei Verbum*, 19 (SD, 27; EB 698). Along these lines, and specifically with regard to the Gospel of Luke, see Benedict XVI: “If we have good reason to be convinced that the Holy Scriptures are ‘inspired,’ that they matured in a special sense under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, then we also have good reason to be convinced that precisely these specific aspects of the Lukan tradition preserve essential features of the original figure of Jesus for us.” *Jesus of Nazareth*, 182; emphasis added. And again, with regard to the Gospel of John, Benedict writes: “This means that the Gospel of John . . . does not simply transmit a stenographic transcript of Jesus’ words and ways; it escorts us, in virtue of understanding-through-remembering, beyond the external into the depth of words and events that come from God and lead back to him. As such, the Gospel is ‘remembering,’ which means that it remains faithful to what really happened and is not . . . a violation of historical events. Rather, it *truly* shows us who Jesus was. . . . It shows us the real Jesus.” *Jesus of Nazareth*, 234–235; emphasis added. Parallels can be drawn between the Pope’s comments on remembering and recent work on the historicity of the Gospels: “In the immediate testimony of the witness, that which lives on in deep memory, the witness ‘sees’ what is disclosed in what happens, the empirical event requiring to be seen as the revelation of God, fact and meaning coinhering. But memory is also remembered and understanding grows. In what is no doubt the most reflective Gospel testimony we have, that of John, the immediacy of memory is by no means lost. Rather, the ongoing process of remembering interpretation

even after the writing of the New Testament, the effects of inspiration are not exhausted, as the living subject of the Church interprets the Scriptures in the same Spirit in whom they were written, grows in understanding of the Scriptures, and thus, “constantly advances toward the fullness of divine truth.”⁹⁴

The Word Incarnate and the Word Inspired

Finally, it is helpful to recall the analogy that magisterial documents have made between the incarnation and biblical inspiration. The encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, was the first magisterial document to make this comparison. In a section discussing how biblical inspiration is compatible with the various ways that ancient authors expressed their thought (for example, using idioms, hyperbole, paradox, and the like), Pius XII remarks that none of these ways

is excluded from the sacred books, provided the way of speaking adopted in no wise contradicts the holiness and truth of God. . . . For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things “except sin” (Heb 4:15), so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect except error. In this consists that “condescension” . . . of the God of providence, which St. John Chrysostom extolled.⁹⁵

Hence, the analogy is used, on the one hand, to affirm inerrancy, and on the other, to provide guidance (regarding literary genres) as to how inerrancy should be understood. *Dei Verbum* takes up the analogy between incarnation and inspiration in paragraph 13, immediately following the discussion of biblical interpretation in 12. The wording is in many ways similar to that of *Divino*.

Hence, in sacred Scripture, with the truth and holiness of God remaining always inviolate, the marvelous “condescension” of eternal wisdom is clearly shown. . . . For the words of God,

ponders and works to yield its fullest meaning.” Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 507–508.

94 *Dei Verbum*, 8 (SD, 22; EB 680). See also Benedict XVI: “The Church’s remembering is not merely a private affair. . . . It is a being-led by the Holy Spirit, who shows us the connectedness of Scripture, the connection between word and reality, and, in doing that, leads us ‘into all the truth.’ This also has some fundamental implications for the concept of *inspiration*. . . . But because the author thinks and writes with the memory of the Church, the ‘we’ to which he belongs opens beyond the personal and is guided in its depths by the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of truth. In this sense, the Gospel itself opens up a path of understanding, which always remains bound to the scriptural word, and yet from generation to generation can lead, and is meant to lead, ever anew into the depth of all the truth.” *Jesus of Nazareth*, 234; emphasis added.

95 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 20 (SD, 129; EB 559).

expressed in human language, have become like unto human speech, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like unto human beings.⁹⁶

While it does not include the parallel found in *Divino* between the phrases “except sin” and “except error,” it nonetheless does make reference, like the encyclical, to the “truth and holiness” of God remaining intact.⁹⁷ As a result, “truth” is considered in all three paragraphs of Chapter 3 of *Dei Verbum* dealing with the inspiration and interpretation of Scripture (paragraphs 11–13); it is considered in the context of or in relation to inspiration (para. 11), interpretation (para. 12), and the incarnation (para. 13).

Later in the document, there is a further reference to the analogy, within the context of the liturgy: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the Body of the Lord, never ceasing to offer to the faithful, especially in the sacred liturgy, the bread of life, received from the one table of God’s Word and Christ’s Body.”⁹⁸

Pope John Paul II also referred to this analogy in his 1993 address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, noting the “strict relationship uniting the inspired biblical texts with the mystery of the incarnation,”⁹⁹ and referring to the two passages just quoted from *Divino* and *Dei Verbum*. Drawing from the analogy, the Pope first cautions against the tendency of some Christians who reject “the mysteries of scriptural inspiration and the incarnation . . . by clinging to a false notion of the Absolute” and who thus ignore “the human circumstances of the Word of

96 *Dei Verbum*, 13 (SD, 25; EB 691). For further discussion, including a synopsis of the two magisterial texts, see Antonio Izquierdo, “La Escritura Inspirada y la Encarnación del Verbo” [Inspired Scripture and the Incarnation of the Word], in Izquierdo, *Scrittura ispirata*, 249–282.

97 In the redaction of the conciliar text, there were proposed emendations involving all of these phrases; see the various proposals and the responses of the Council’s theological commission in Gil Hellín, *Synopsis*, 105–107. See also the discussion in Miguel Ángel Tábet, “Ispirazione, Condiscendenza Divina ed Incarnazione nella Teologia di Questo Secolo” [Inspiration, Divine Condensation and Incarnation in the Theology of this Century], *Annales Theologici* 8 (1994): 235–283, at 265–266.

98 *Dei Verbum*, 21. The *Catechism*, nos. 101 and 103, refers respectively to *Dei Verbum*, 13 and 21, and thus places the analogy at the very beginning of its treatment of Scripture. See the discussion in Tábet, “Ispirazione,” 266.

99 Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 23, 1993), 6 (SD, 170–180, at 173).

God.”¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, the Pope also indicates that “Catholic exegesis must be careful not to limit itself to the human aspects of the biblical texts.”¹⁰¹

In a possible future document, the analogy could be deepened by considering the Church in relation to the incarnate Word, on the one hand, and in relation to the inspired Word, on the other. In fact, *Dei Verbum* already points in this direction, saying that “the spouse of the incarnate Word, the Church, taught by the Holy Spirit, strives to attain day by day a more profound understanding of the sacred Scriptures.”¹⁰² As we have seen, the writings of the current Pope stress the role of the Church as the living subject which receives God’s revelation with faith and then progresses to the full understanding of that revelation. In this regard, if the relationship of the Church as the spouse of the incarnate Word is such that “the two shall become one”¹⁰³—that is, the Church becomes the Body of Christ—then with the analogy one can perhaps similarly relate the mystery of inspiration to the Church. As he has said, there is “an interwoven relationship between Church and Bible, between the People of God and the Word of God.”¹⁰⁴

The Mystery of the Lord who is the Word

Consideration of the analogy between the incarnation and the inspiration of the Bible also reminds us that through the inspired words of Scripture we enter into the mystery of the Word made flesh.¹⁰⁵ Through the truth of Scripture, we enter into the mystery of the One who is truth itself.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, this is what the Church’s teaching on the inspiration and truth of Scripture enables us to do: it helps us recognize Scripture as a sure and authoritative witness of the Word.

In his reflection at the opening of the 2008 Synod, Benedict began by meditating on the text of Psalm 119:89: “Your Word, Lord, stands forever; it is firm as the heavens.”¹⁰⁷ In his address, he alluded to many of the points we have considered: the inspiration and truth of Scripture, its divine and human authors,

100 John Paul II, Address (April 23, 1993), 8 (SD, 175). In this regard, some scholars refer to biblical fundamentalism as a kind of monophysitism; see Izquierdo, “Escritura Inspirada,” 257.

101 John Paul II, Address (April 23, 1993), 9 (SD, 175). The “absolutization” of the historical-critical method is seen as a kind of Nestorianism; see Izquierdo, “Escritura Inspirada,” 257.

102 *Dei Verbum*, 23 (SD, 29; EB 703).

103 Eph. 5:31–32; see Gen. 2:24.

104 Joseph Ratzinger, “What in Fact is Theology?” in Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, ed. Stephan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 29–37, at 33.

105 John 1:14.

106 See John 14:6.

107 New American Bible translation.

the Word and the Church. We close by quoting excerpts from his reflection, which help us appreciate the grandeur of the written Word of God.

This refers to the solidity of the Word. It is solid, it is the true reality on which one must base one's life. . . . Only the Word of God is the foundation of all reality, it is as stable as the heavens and more than the heavens, it is reality. Therefore, we must change our concept of realism. The realist is the one who recognizes the Word of God, in this apparently weak reality, as the foundation of all things. Realist is the one who builds his life on this foundation, which is permanent. . . . We are always searching for the Word of God. . . . Just reading it does not mean necessarily that we have truly understood the Word of God. The danger is that we only see the human words and do not find the true actor within, the Holy Spirit. . . . We must always look for the Word within the words. Therefore, exegesis, the true reading of Holy Scripture, is not only a literary phenomenon, not only reading a text. It is the movement of my existence. It is moving towards the Word of God in the human words. Only by conforming ourselves to the mystery of God, to the Lord who is the Word, can we enter within the Word, can we truly find the Word of God in human words. . . . Only God is infinite. And therefore his Word too is universal and knows no boundaries. Therefore by entering into the Word of God we really enter into the divine universe. We escape the limits of our experience and we enter into the reality that is truly universal. Entering into communion with the Word of God, we enter a communion of the Church that lives the Word of God. . . . We go towards the depths, in the true grandeur of the only truth, the great truth of God.¹⁰⁸

108 Pope Benedict XVI, Address at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops (October 6, 2008), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (October 8, 2008), 5.