

RESTRICTED INNERRANCY AND THE “HERMENEUTIC OF DISCONTINUITY”

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The nature and scope of biblical inerrancy, or the truth of Sacred Scripture, has not in recent decades been a popular topic in the writings of Catholic theologians and biblical scholars. According to the standard international bibliography of Christian scholarship, Louvain University's *Elenchus Bibliographicus*, not one publication by a Catholic writer has mentioned either the truth or inerrancy of Scripture in its title since 1995, and only three have done so since 1983.¹ The most recent authoritative and comprehensive general survey of modern Catholic biblical scholarship, the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, includes no clear statement of Catholic doctrine on the guaranteed truth of Scripture; it mentions the subject only once, very briefly, and in passing.²

The long-dormant question of inerrancy has been reawakened, however, as a result of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome in October 2008, dedicated to the “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.” This issue was explicitly raised at the Synod and news reports indicated that the ensuing discussion brought to light disagreements and uncertainties among the assembled bishops as to whether the Second Vatican Council (1963–1965) allows for the possibility of error in sacred Scripture. Accordingly, one of the Synod's final propositions requested that the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith “clarify the concepts of the inspiration and truth of the Bible, as well as their reciprocal relationship, so that the teaching of *Dei Verbum* 11 may be better understood.”³ No doubt as a result of that request, this issue was chosen as the key theme

1 See Prosper Grech, “Quid est Veritas? Rivelazione e Ispirazione: Nuove Prospettive” [What is Truth? Revelation and Inspiration: New Perspectives], *Lateranum* 61 (1995): 413–424; G. Blandino, “The Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture,” *Teresianum* 39 (1988): 465–477; and Andrés Ibañez Arana, “Inspiración, Inerrancia e Interpretación de la S. Escritura en el Concilio Vaticano II” [Inspiration, Inerrancy and Interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures in the Second Vatican Council], *Scriptorium Victorienne* 33 (1986): 5–96, 225–329; and 34 (1987): 5–44). The 2010 edition of the *Elenchus* will presumably add a fourth publication to this minuscule collection, namely, my article, “Does Vatican Council II Allow for Errors in Sacred Scripture?” *Divinitas* 52:3 (2009): 279–304. Since 1983, just fifteen other Catholic books or articles referenced in the *Elenchus* have the word “inspiration” in their titles.

2 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (September 21, 1993), sec. I, para. F, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchar, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 244–317, at 273. Hereafter abbreviated SD.

3 Synod of Bishops, 12th Ordinary General Assembly, List of Propositions, 12. Available

for discussion at both the April 2009 and April 2010 plenary sessions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, a consultative body of the doctrine congregation. At this writing, nothing as yet has been published regarding the results of the Commission's deliberations. Nonetheless it seems an opportune time to review the current status of the question regarding Catholic teaching on inerrancy.

In this essay I will first review classical Catholic doctrine on the issue, then I will argue that the crucial text of Vatican II—paragraph 11 of the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965)⁴—should be read in harmony with this tradition—that is, with what Pope Benedict XVI has identified as a “hermeneutic of continuity.” This will involve a critical analysis, from the standpoint of both faith and reason, of a widespread tendency to read this conciliar text according to a “hermeneutic of discontinuity,” or rupture, with our doctrinal heritage.⁵

The Drift of Catholic Academic Thought

To gain a bird's-eye view of the prevailing direction in which Catholic academic thought on this matter has travelled over the last hundred years, we can juxtapose three brief statements separated by intervals of approximately half a century:

First, from 1907, is Pope Pius X's condemnation of the following statement: “Divine inspiration does not extend to the whole of sacred Scripture in such a way as to preserve each and every one of its parts free from all error.”⁶

Second, from 1950 is this statement by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical letter, *Humani Generis*: “For some boldly pervert the sense of the [First] Vatican Council's definition regarding God as the author of Holy Scripture, and again put forward the opinion—already repeatedly condemned—that the Bible's immunity from error pertains only to what it hands down in matters concerning God, morals, and religion. They even wrongly speak of a human sense of the sacred books beneath which their divine sense lies hidden, and declare that only the latter is infallible.”⁷

(in Italian) online at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20081025_elenco-prop-finali_it.html.

- 4 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (November 18, 1965) (SD, 19–31).
- 5 For his understanding of the hermeneutics of continuity and discontinuity, see 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.
- 6 Pope St. Pius X, *Lamentabili Sane* [With Truly Lamentable Results], Syllabus Condemning the Errors of the Modernists (July 3, 1907), prop. 11, in Heinrich Denzinger, ed., *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitonum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum* [Handbook of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations concerning Matters of Faith and Morals], 32nd ed. (Freiberg: Herder, 1963), 3411; Eng.: *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto, 2002). Hereafter abbreviated DS. Pius ordered (*mandavit*) that each of the sixty-five propositions in his syllabus were “to be held by all as reprobated and proscribed [*reprobatas ac proscriptas ab omnibus haberi*]” (DS 3466).
- 7 Pius XII, *Humani Generis* [The Human Race], Encyclical Letter on Certain False Opinions

Finally, there is this statement, found in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, or working paper, prepared for the Synod of Bishops in 2008: "Although all parts of Sacred Scripture are divinely inspired, inerrancy pertains only to 'that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation' (*Dei Verbum*, 11)."⁸

The contrast between the last statement and the preceding two is clear. Whereas the papal pronouncements strongly emphasize that, as a consequence of the entire Bible's divine authorship, it is completely free from error, the 2008 statement interprets Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation as teaching one version of a thesis that we may conveniently describe as *restricted biblical inerrancy*—the thesis that what the sacred writers say on certain subjects, or express in certain ways, may at times be untrue. According to the version of this thesis attributed here to *Dei Verbum*, 11, certain things in the Bible are there "for the sake of our salvation" while others are not; and while the former are guaranteed to be free from error, the latter are not.

It is noteworthy that this 2008 statement is not just an individual theologian's interpretation of Vatican II's teaching. It is embedded in the working paper intended to be the starting point for the Synod's deliberations. This document, developed following a year of consultation with Scripture scholars, theologians, and bishops from around the world, would seem to suggest then, that the "restrictive" reading of *Dei Verbum* has become very widespread, perhaps even the conventional wisdom, in the Catholic academy. Of course, the *Instrumentum Laboris* does not enjoy any magisterial status and the Synod itself eventually refrained from endorsing this position. Nevertheless, it seems deeply significant that this restrictive understanding of inerrancy—in undeniable discontinuity with the Church's Tradition—had within half a century of its most recent condemnation by the magisterium, attained such a high level of scholarly and ecclesial acceptance.

"Unrestricted" Inerrancy in the Biblical Encyclicals

To understand the significance of this drift in Catholic thought, we will now recall several more extensive expositions of key principles found in the three papal encyclicals dedicated exclusively to the study of Scripture.

Threatening to Undermine the Foundations of Catholic Doctrine (August 12, 1950), 22 (*DS* 3887; *SD*, 141).

8 Synod of Bishops, "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," *Instrumentum Laboris* (May 11, 2008), 15(c) (Latin: "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 the English-language translation, the first clause of this sentence was poorly translated in such a way as to explicitly call into question the full extent of the Bible's divine inspiration: "With regards [*sic*] to what *might be* inspired in the many parts of Sacred Scripture"; emphasis added. The translations into all other vernaculars posted on the Vatican website accurately reflected the Latin text. Available online at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/index.htm.

The most fundamental and explicit magisterial assertions of unrestricted biblical inerrancy come from Pope Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus* (1893).⁹ Never in eighteen centuries had any pope or Church council issued anything comparable to this encyclical—an authoritative and wide-ranging coverage of the whole field of biblical studies, including both theoretical and practical aspects, in light of new rationalist and “scientific” challenges to the Bible’s credibility. First, the Pope asserts that “it is absolutely wrong and forbidden either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of holy Scripture or to admit that the sacred writer himself has erred.”¹⁰

We note that Leo is insisting here that everything the Bible’s *human* authors write is inerrant; for he sees their words as being simultaneously the Word of God. This is worth dwelling upon. The Pope does not present the doctrine of unrestricted inerrancy as an independent, self-standing point of divine revelation. Rather, he affirms it as a revealed truth directly arising from, and inseparably joined to, a still more basic element of the deposit of faith: the *divine authorship* of the entire Bible, as defined by three previous ecumenical councils:

Inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true. This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church, solemnly defined in the Councils of Florence and Trent, and finally confirmed and expressly formulated by the [First] Council of the Vatican.¹¹

The Pope then goes on to cite the last-mentioned First Vatican Council as follows:

The Church holds [the biblical books] as sacred and canonical not because, having been composed by human industry, they were afterwards approved by her authority; nor just because they contain revelation without error, but because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God for their Author.¹²

Furthermore, the pontiff asserts, the concept of divine authorship may not be reduced to some kind of supernatural enlightenment by which the Holy Spirit guided and protected the human writers’ thoughts while not necessarily bearing

9 Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* [The God of All Providence], Encyclical Letter on the Study of Scripture (November 18, 1893) (SD, 37–61), also in *Enchiridion Biblicum: Documenti della Chiesa sulla Sacra Scrittura* [Documents of the Church Concerning Sacred Scripture], ed. Alfio Filippi and Erminio Lora, 2nd ed. (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1993). Hereafter abbreviated *EB*.

10 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 55; EB 124).

11 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (DS 3292–3293; EB 124–125; SD, 55).

12 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 55–56; EB 125 [citing DS 3006; EB 77]).

responsibility for the precise words in which they chose to express those thoughts. Rather, Leo says, divine authorship means that, by supernatural power,

[God] impelled and moved [the human authors] to write, and assisted them in writing, in such a way that they first rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth, all the things which he ordered and those things only [Latin: *ea omnia eaque sola, quae ipse iuberet*]. Otherwise he would not be the author of the whole of sacred Scripture.¹³

The conclusion drawn by Leo in *Providentissimus Deus* bases full inerrancy on what he sees as the doctrinal "bed-rock" in this matter. "It follows," he concludes, "that those who maintain that an error is possible in any genuine passage of the sacred books either pervert the Catholic notion of inspiration or make God the author of such error."¹⁴ In short, all Scripture is divinely inspired; divine inspiration means divine authorship; and divine authorship means that everything uttered in writing by the human writers has been uttered by God.

Pope Benedict XV, in his 1920 encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus*,¹⁵ was concerned to correct certain resurgent errors that were only superficially compatible with Leo's teaching in *Providentissimus Deus*. Here is the first example he gives:

[Certain contemporary authors] are willing to acknowledge that inspiration itself does indeed extend to every statement—and even to every single word—in the Bible. But then, appealing to a distinction between the primary or religious and the secondary or profane element in Scripture, they narrow down and restrict the effects of inspiration—above all, absolute truth and immunity from error—to that primary or religious element.¹⁶

There is an evident similarity between this thesis, rejected by the Pope in 1920, and the assertion we quote from the *Instrumentum Laboris* in 2008. In practice, in the work of interpreting a given biblical text, any differences between these two statements would probably approach vanishing point. Let us suppose that, in studying a certain part of Scripture, I begin by asking myself, "What is the *primary or religious element* in this passage?" with the assumption that while this "religious" element is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit to be free from error, other

13 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 55–56; EB 125).

14 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 21 (SD, 56; EB 126).

15 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) (SD, 81–111).

16 Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 19 (SD, 88; EB 454).

elements in the text would remain “error-prone.” In asking this question I would be mentally dividing the Scripture passage into two compartments with virtually the same boundaries and specific content as those I would have discerned if my initial question had been, “What does this passage say *for the sake of our salvation?*” In any case, the assumption in both cases is precisely what *Spiritus Paraclitus* is rejecting. There simply can be no error-prone content in any biblical passage, since its integral divine authorship rules out the very possibility of error.¹⁷

Since *Spiritus Paraclitus*, the hermeneutical method that has been most extensively developed—and, with due precautions, increasingly approved by the Church’s magisterium—has been the discernment in Scripture of a greater diversity of *literary genres* than was previously recognized. While certain sections of the Bible may superficially look like “straight” history, they are now widely understood as having been intended by their human and divine authors as instances of parable, allegory, or some other ancient Near Eastern forms of writing in which at least some expressions were not intended to be taken as exact and literal statements of fact.

Benedict XV had rebuked scholars who “take refuge too readily”¹⁸ in this approach, but he tacitly left room for future harmonious doctrinal development here by leaving in place his predecessor Pius X’s cautious acknowledgement that some parts of the Bible might be open to a valid reinterpretation along such lines. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, in a papally confirmed response to a question in 1905, expressed disapproval, as a general rule, of the then-novel theory that some “narratives . . . are historical in appearance only.” It conceded, however, that some passages of Scripture might prove to be of this nature, while warning that in any given case this was “not to be easily or rashly admitted.”¹⁹

17 Benedict goes on to censure certain other unsound or even sophistical theories used in the early twentieth century in an effort to reconcile *Providentissimus Deus* with seemingly erroneous statements in Scripture: for instance, the theory of “relative” truth, or history “according to appearances,” according to which the Bible’s “truth” is sometimes merely what was then commonly *thought* to be true; and the appeal to presumed “tacit quotations,” wherein the sacred writer supposedly reports the error-prone statements of non-inspired writers or speakers, but without indicating to the reader that he is doing so (EB, 456, 461). There has been little resurgence in recent decades of these particular theories, which have now generally been replaced, among apologists for inerrancy, by a broader appeal to the nature and diversity of biblical literary genres.

18 Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 26 (SD, 90; DS 3654; EB 461). Benedict admonished those biblical scholars “[who] claim to find certain literary genres in the sacred books that cannot be reconciled with the entire and perfect truth of God’s word, or who suggest such origins of the Bible as would weaken—if not destroy—its authority.”

19 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; DS 3373).

Pius XII and the Analogy of Word Inspired and Word Incarnate

During the period between the world wars, many Catholic exegetes, mindful of the biblical commission's guidelines and caveats, continued making further use of this appeal to diverse literary genres, and of other critical approaches—for the most part without incurring any Vatican censures. This paved the way for the third encyclical devoted to biblical studies, Pope Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943).²⁰ Many years later, after Pius's death, the idea was floated that this encyclical had "opened new doors" for Catholic Scripture scholars.²¹ According to this reading, Pius supposedly authorized principles or approaches in biblical studies that had been forbidden by his predecessors. Even though this posthumous assessment of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* has now become mainstream among those who hold to a "restricted" view of inerrancy,²² it has no foundation either in the text of the encyclical itself or in the most authoritative scholarly commentaries that accompanied its publication.²³ Indeed, Pius himself, only seven years after his purportedly revolutionary encyclical, insisted on its full doctrinal continuity with the preceding encyclicals and sharply denounced disturbing trends in Scripture scholarship—including, as we have mentioned above, any claim of restricted inerrancy. In *Humani Generis* (1950) he summed up his criticisms as follows:

Everyone sees how foreign all this is to the principles and norms of interpretation rightly fixed by our predecessors of happy memory, Leo XIII in his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, and Benedict XV in the encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus*, as also by ourselves in the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.²⁴

What Pius had really done in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* was to express his satisfaction and encouragement to biblical scholars who had been working in ways that had already been recognized as legitimate—at least tacitly, cautiously, or in seminal form—by the Church's magisterium. In particular, Pius spoke of progress made

20 Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [Inspired by the Divine Spirit], Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies (September 30, 1943) (SD, 115–139).

21 A provocative article that gave the initial impetus to this thesis was Luis Alonso Schökel, "Dove Va L'Esegesi Cattolica?" [Where is Catholic Exegesis Going?], *La Civiltà Cattolica* (September 3, 1960): 449–460. Alonso's claim was that back in 1943 Pius XII himself "was very conscious of opening a new and wide door through which many novelties would be entering the precincts of Catholic exegesis," at 456.

22 Joseph A. Fitzmyer has called Pius's encyclical a "liberating" and "revolutionary" document that lifted the "dark cloud of reactionism that hung over" Catholic biblical studies. *The Biblical Commission's Document, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church": Text and Commentary* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993), 19–20.

23 See Augustin Bea, "L'Enciclica 'Divino afflante Spiritu'" [The Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*], *La Civiltà Cattolica* (November 10, 1943): 212–224.

24 Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 24 (SD, 141; EB 613).

in the study of literary genres and “ancient Near Eastern modes of thought and writing.”²⁵ However, recent commentators who emphasize this “progressive” aspect of the encyclical gloss over or ignore the fact that, for Pius, studies in this area were worthy of further pursuit largely because they were proving to be a new means toward a deeply traditional end—upholding the Catholic dogma that biblical inerrancy is unrestricted in terms of subject-matter. This observation recurs as a *leitmotif* throughout the encyclical.

In his introductory paragraph, Pius praises Leo XIII’s zeal to correct “certain Catholic writers [who] had dared to restrict the truth of sacred Scripture solely to matters of faith and morals, and to regard other matters, whether in the domain of physical science or history, as ‘obiter dicta’ [incidental] and—as they contended—in no wise connected with faith.”²⁶ The Pope then proclaims in the opening line of Part I that “the first and greatest concern of Leo XIII” was to defend the Church’s faith that there is “no error whatsoever” in Scripture—not even in regard to “profane” matters. Pius follows this immediately with his own solemn confirmation of Leo’s teaching on unlimited inerrancy.²⁷

He returns to this theme repeatedly. In a memorable analogy, Pius affirms that just as “the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things ‘except sin,’ so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error.”²⁸ He goes on to stress that studying biblical literary forms and modes of expression is an important prerequisite for “explaining the sacred Scripture and demonstrating and proving its immunity from all error.”²⁹ The value of such studies for apologetics is recommended again and again in succeeding paragraphs, as the Pope exhorts scholars to continue their research in all the relevant ancillary sciences in order to deal with biblical difficulties that remain unresolved.³⁰ Scholars must persevere, he says, in the quest for solutions that will be in accord both with the “certain conclusions of the profane disciplines” and with the Church’s “traditional teaching that sacred Scripture is free from all error.”³¹

The very urgency with which Pius calls on Catholic exegetes to seek a convincing harmony between Scripture and these “profane” or secular areas of knowledge underlines the profound discontinuity between his understanding of inerrancy and that of contemporary writers and teachers who praise his “pro-

25 See EB 555–565.

26 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 1 (SD, 116; EB 538).

27 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 3–4 (SD, 116–117; EB 539–540).

28 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 37 (SD, 129; EB 559; Latin: “Sicut enim substantiale Dei Verbum hominibus simile factum est quoad omnia ‘absque peccato’ (Heb. 4:15), ita etiam Dei verba, humanis linguis expressa, quoad omnia humano sermoni assimilia facta sunt, excepto errore”).

29 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 38 (SD, 129; EB 560).

30 See Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 39–46 (EB 560–564).

31 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 46 (SD, 132; EB 564).

gressive" encyclical while denying the need for any such harmonization. On the soothing assumption that divine inspiration was never intended to guarantee the Bible's truth in these "non-salvific" matters of history and empirical science, they regard the very attempt to uphold its inerrancy in these areas as naïve, futile, and unnecessary. Thus, rather than seek the solutions to biblical difficulties as Pius urged, they "solve" these problems by simply denying that they *are* problematical for believers.

Vatican II and the Limits of Inerrancy

This brings us to Vatican II, the authority of which Catholic advocates of restricted inerrancy invariably invoke. I will advance here a critique of the restricted inerrancy view and of the appeal to *Dei Verbum*, 11, to justify this view. I will use as my point of reference the statement in the 2008 *Instrumentum Laboris*, since it expresses clearly and succinctly the thesis I am criticizing. Here it is again:

Although all parts of sacred Scripture are divinely inspired, inerrancy pertains only to "that truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" [*Dei Verbum*, 11].

The following objections can be made to this interpretation of the conciliar statement cited here: The word "only" (*tantummodo*), complementing and reinforcing the adversative first clause ("Although . . ."), is a gratuitous addition. No Latin word or expression in the conciliar text corresponds to it. Second, translations such as "that truth which God wanted *put into* (or *confided to* or *consigned to*) the sacred writings" are not accurate. There is no restrictive adjective "that" (*eam* or *illam*) in the Latin original. The original Latin term, *consignare*, does not mean "consign." This English derivative needs both a direct and an indirect object; we *consign* something *to* someone or something else. The Latin verb means "record," and so takes only a direct object. This in turn means that *litteris sacris* ("the sacred writings") is not in the dative case, but is an instrumental ablative.

So the Council's true meaning in *Dei Verbum*, 11, is that the whole Bible—not just certain parts or themes within it—is the *means whereby*, or the *form in which*, God wanted his saving truth to be recorded. The Bible is not being depicted as a sort of receptacle for both salvifically relevant and salvifically irrelevant utterances. A more accurate translation, bringing out the idea that everything the biblical authors affirm is *both* "for the sake of our salvation" *and* free from error, would be as follows:

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors or hagiographers affirm must be held as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must in consequence acknowledge that, by means of the books of Scripture, the truth that God, for the sake of our salvation,

wanted recorded in the form of the sacred writings is taught firmly, faithfully, and without error.

The gloss of the *Instrumentum Laboris* interpolating “only” into the second clause renders the above sentence incompatible with both faith and reason. With faith, because the first clause alone is sufficient to make it clear that *everything* affirmed by the inspired authors is true. For it says that we must hold everything they affirm to be affirmed also by the Holy Spirit—who cannot err. It is incompatible with reason because adding “only” would turn the whole sentence into a *non sequitur* so egregious that no Church council could possibly have intended to teach it—one in which the conclusion not only does not follow from the premises, but is radically incompatible with them. For it would make the sentence say that *since all* that the inspired authors affirm is affirmed also by the Holy Spirit, *therefore only some of* what they affirm (namely, what is relevant to salvation) is guaranteed to be true.

Further support for my reading of *Dei Verbum*, 11, can be found in the final sentence of the paragraph, which follows immediately after the sentence we have been discussing. The Council fathers appeal to 2 Timothy 3:16–17 as biblical support for what they have just said (“Thus [*Itaque*], ‘All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable . . .’”). Here the Council makes still clearer that its intention in the previous sentence is to teach that everything in sacred Scripture is *both* inspired by God *and* relevant for our salvation. The Latin *itaque* here makes no sense otherwise.

During the drafting of *Dei Verbum*, the official *relator* told the Council fathers that the purpose of the amendment specifying the “salvific” character or purpose of biblical truth was not to imply that some affirmations of the sacred writers may be false, but rather to help believers to explain and defend the Catholic belief that all of them are true. The *relator* said:

By the term “salvific” (*salutarem*) it is by no means suggested that sacred Scripture is not in its integrity the inspired Word of God. . . . This expression does *not* imply any *material limitation* of 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 all things *affirmed* in the Bible are true—not only matters of faith and morals and facts bound up with the history of salvation. For this reason the [doctrinal commission overseeing the drafting process] has decided that the expression should be retained.³²

32 Lat.: “Voce ‘salutaris’ nullo modo suggeritur S. Scripturam non esse integraliter inspiratam et verbum Dei. . . . Hæc expressio *nullam* inducit *materialem limitationem* veritatis Scripturæ, sed indicat eius *specificationem formalem*, cuius ratio habeatur in diiudicando quo sensu non tantum res fidei et morum atque facta cum historia salutis coniuncta . . . sed omnia quæ in Scriptura asseruntur sunt vera. Unde statuit Commissio expressionem esse servandam.” *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* [Synodal Acts of the Ecumenical Council Vatican II],

The idea of a "material limitation" to biblical truth would be the idea that a certain number of the affirmations made by the sacred authors are immune from error, while the rest are not. This, in effect, is the hermeneutic adopted by the authors of the *Instrumentum Laboris* and others who, interpret *Dei Verbum*, 11, restrictively. Since the Council we can observe two basic ways in which scholars advance this idea of a material limitation to Scripture. Some commentators claim openly that there are biblical affirmations which enjoy no divine protection from error because they are not recorded "for the sake of our salvation." Others ostensibly give assent to Vatican II's confirmation that all biblical affirmations are guaranteed to be true; but they effectively deny this teaching by giving it a sophisticated "reinterpretation." Like those commentators in the first group, they interpret *Dei Verbum*, 11, as implying that some things in the Bible are *not* there "for the sake of our salvation" and thus are not guaranteed to be free from error. But they then go on to maintain that this purportedly "non-salvific" character of some biblical propositions is enough to disqualify them from being true *affirmations* of the biblical text.

Arguably the most influential exposition of this version of restricted inerrancy—one that has reached countless thousands of professors, clergy, seminarians, and other students—is that of the Jesuit scholar, Roderick MacKenzie,³³ writing in the most widely-used English-language edition of the Vatican II documents in the initial post-conciliar period. In a personal footnote to *Dei Verbum*, 11, which is not visibly distinguished from the official conciliar footnotes among which it is inserted, MacKenzie writes:

It is *only* [in matters concerning salvation] that the veracity of God and the inerrancy of the inspired writers are engaged. . . . The [text] is authoritative and inerrant in what it affirms about the revelation of God and the history of salvation. *According to the intentions of its authors, divine and human, it makes no other affirmations.*³⁴

32 vols. (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–), vol. 4, pt. 5, 708; emphasis in original. This explanation was presented when the draft under discussion affirmed that the books of Scripture "teach saving truth [*veritatem salutarem*] without error"; but it clearly applies equally to the final text, in which the adjective *salutarem* was replaced by an adjectival clause similar in meaning: "*veritatem, quam Deus nostræ salutis causa Litteris Sacris consignari voluit.*"

33 MacKenzie, rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute from 1963 to 1969, is not identified as the author of the comments on *Dei Verbum* in or near the conciliar text itself. However, his signature appears on the introductory essay preceding the text of the Dogmatic Constitution, and an editorial note at the beginning of the book says that the unofficial notes to each conciliar document are the work of the scholar "whose name is at the end of the essay introducing the document." Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), xiv; see also 110.

34 Abbott, *Vatican II*, 119, n. 31; emphasis added.

In other words, a *biblical* affirmation—in contrast, it would seem, to the affirmations found in all other kinds of literature—is to be identified and distinguished from other types of utterance not by looking at its “structural” linguistic features (choice of words, literary genre, rules of grammar and syntax, etc.), but simply by noting that it treats of a certain predetermined and privileged *theme* or *topic*. That is, by giving priority to its matter, not its form: to *what* the writer is talking about, not *how* he talks about it. This approach would have exegetes ask, “Is this text about a matter concerning salvation? Is it about the revelation of God and the history of salvation?” If the exegete concludes that it is not, then he can safely assume—according to this reading of *Dei Verbum*, 11—that the sacred writer is not intending to affirm anything at all.

This reading in effect resorts to a kind of hermeneutical sleight-of-hand that enables the exegete to deny the “affirmed” status of what really are affirmations made by the inspired authors. It amounts to an attempt to reconcile the Catholic dogma of biblical inerrancy with an admission that the Bible does indeed contain errors. But this kind of radical reinterpretation—verbally professing a Catholic dogma while altering the meaning the Church herself has always given to it—was anathematized by Vatican Council I.³⁵ Moreover, an analysis of the references in the official footnote to this sentence in *Dei Verbum*, 11 (footnote 5), reinforces the conclusion that the Council is intent on upholding the traditional doctrine—that *all* the inspired authors’ affirmations are free from error, even in matters of history and science.³⁶

Inerrancy in Catholic Teaching Since Vatican II

So far we have looked at the basic evidence from the Council itself, arguing from the approved text and footnotes, as explained by the official *relatio*, or explanation of the text. But it is important to note that high Church authorities during the post-conciliar period have also rejected the kind of hermeneutic that seeks to read a doctrine of restricted inerrancy into the “salvation” clause of *Dei Verbum*, 11.

No scholar was better qualified than Cardinal Augustin Bea, S.J., to testify authoritatively to the intent of the conciliar text. At Vatican II he presided at the key meeting of the Theological Commission during which the wording of this sentence about inerrancy in *Dei Verbum*, 11, was finalized. Shortly after the Council, he published a work³⁷ that includes several pages on the redactional history and

35 Vatican I solemnly defined, “If anyone shall say that sometimes, in accordance with the progress of science, dogmas declared by the Church are to be given a meaning different from that which the Church has understood and understands, let him be anathema” (DS 3043).

36 These footnote references are discussed in detail in my “Does Vatican Council II Allow for Errors in Sacred Scripture,” 288–295. A slightly amplified version of this article, republished in *Living Tradition* 145–146 (March–May 2010), is available online at www.rtforum.org/lt/lt145.html.

37 Augustin Bea, *La Parola de Dio e l’Umanità: La Dottrina del Concilio Sulla Rivelazione* (Assisi:

correct interpretation of this sentence. Bea's verdict is unambiguous: "Let us ask, therefore, if the *text we have now* implies a restrictive interpretation of inerrancy. Here also the answer is certainly negative."³⁸

Even before Bea's commentary was published, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had sent a letter to the presidents of all the world's bishops' conferences and to all major religious superiors, warning against wrong and dangerous interpretations of the Council that had begun to circulate almost immediately after its conclusion.³⁹ Heading the congregation's list of ten widespread false interpretations was this:

Some, purposely disregarding Tradition, have recourse to sacred Scripture, but restrict the scope and force of biblical inspiration and inerrancy, and hold false views on the historical value of the texts.⁴⁰

In 1993, John Paul II gave an allocution to commemorate the fiftieth and hundredth anniversaries of the encyclicals *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and *Providentissimus Deus*, respectively. He confirmed Pius XII's analogy between God's Word in Scripture and the incarnate Word, describing it this way:

The strict relationship uniting the inspired biblical texts with the mystery of the incarnation was expressed by the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in the following terms: "Just 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." Repeated almost literally by the conciliar Constitution *Dei*

Citadella Editrice, 1967), 187–190. Eng.: *The Word of God and Mankind* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1967).

38 Bea, *La Parola de Dio*, 190 (Italian: "Domandiamo pertanto, se l'attuale testo comporti una interpretazione restrittiva dell'inerranza o no. Anche qui la risposta è senz'altro negativa"); emphasis in original. The emphasis is due to the fact that Bea is here comparing the final, approved text to that of an earlier draft that was arguably more open to a restrictive interpretation.

39 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Cum Oecumenicum Concilium* [The Ecumenical Council], Circular Letter to the Venerable Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences and Religious Superiors on certain opinions and errors arising from false interpretations of the Decrees of the Second Vatican Council (July 24, 1966), in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* [Official Acts of the Holy See] 58 (1966): 659–661. Hereafter abbreviated AAS; available online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/aas/index_sp.htm.

40 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Oecumenicum Concilium*, 661 (Lat.: "Imprimis occurrit ipsa Sacra Revelatio: sunt etenim qui ad Sacram Scripturam recurrunt Traditione consulto seposita, sed Biblicae inspirationis et inerrantiae ambitum et vim coartant et de historicorum textuum valore non recte sentient").

Verbum (13), this statement sheds light on a parallelism rich in meaning.⁴¹

We have seen above how emphatically Pius XII insisted that the Bible's inerrancy is unrestricted in its scope; John Paul, in confirming his predecessor's statement here, could not have understood it in any other sense. Not only are the words written by the human authors said to be "words of God" himself, but the parallel with the incarnation demands by its very nature that the Bible's exemption from error not be limited to what it says on certain themes. Otherwise, the parallel would imply—not just mistakenly but blasphemously—that Christ's exemption from sin is also limited in some way.

A similar observation can be made concerning the 1998 affirmation of biblical inerrancy by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Both the wording and the context of the congregation's statement demonstrate that it intends to affirm unrestricted inerrancy. In a doctrinal note accompanying a revision of Church law promulgated by Pope John Paul II, the congregation includes "the absence of error in the inspired sacred writings"⁴² among those truths that are "divinely revealed" and hence requiring "the assent of theological faith."⁴³ This "absence of error" is affirmed absolutely—that is, without any qualifications; by the ordinary rules of language, that is already sufficient to exclude restricted inerrancy. The first reference cited by the congregation is to Leo's assertion in *Providentissimus Deus* that unrestricted inerrancy is "the ancient and constant faith of the Church."⁴⁴ As we have seen, this assertion by Leo is arguably the strongest and clearest affirmation of unrestricted inerrancy ever to appear in a magisterial document. By citing *Dei Verbum*, 11, in this same footnote, the doctrinal congregation also makes it clear that the "absence of error" (*sine errore*) of which Vatican II speaks is to be understood in the same way that Leo understood it: as a *total* absence of error.

So far we have made two main points. First, the Bible's unrestricted inerrancy, prior to Vatican II, had been proposed as a Catholic dogma inseparable from the still more basic revealed truth of the Bible's integral divine authorship. Secondly, we have argued that the clause in *Dei Verbum*, 11, specifying the Bible's "salvific" purpose cannot legitimately be understood as implying the opposed thesis of restricted inerrancy; indeed, we have pointed out that such an interpretation of the conciliar text has been repeatedly ruled out, explicitly and implicitly, by the Church's teaching authority.

41 Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 23, 1993), 6 (*SD*, 170–180, at 173; *EB* 1239–1258, at 1245).

42 AAS 90 (1998): 549, no. 11 (Lat.: "Absentia erroris in scriptis sacris inspiratis").

43 AAS 90 (1998): 546, no. 5.

44 AAS 90 (1998): 549, n. 30, with references to *DS* 3293 and *Dei Verbum*, 11.

MacKenzie, Brown, and the Practical Implications of Restricted Inerrancy

It might be objected that my above criticism of MacKenzie is not entirely fair, in that it does not bring out the fact that in arguing for restricted inerrancy, he appeals to the same conciliar *relatio* that I claim militates against that position. This point needs to be considered more thoroughly. Here is MacKenzie's complete footnote, with emphasis added to the words where he refers to the *relator's* announcement that the mention of salvific purpose in *Dei Verbum*, 11, "indicates Scripture's *formal specification*" and "does not imply any material limitation of the truth of Scripture":

The Bible was not written in order to teach the natural sciences, nor to give information on merely political history. It treats of these (and all other subjects) only insofar as they are involved in matters concerning salvation. It is only in this respect that the veracity of God and the inerrancy of the inspired writers are engaged. *This is not a quantitative distinction, as though some sections treated of salvation (and were inerrant), while others gave merely natural knowledge (and were fallible). It is formal, and applies to the whole text.* The latter is authoritative and inerrant in what it affirms about the revelation of God and the history of salvation. According to the intentions of its authors, divine and human, it makes no other affirmations.⁴⁵

Now, by speaking of "sections" of Scripture and of their "whole text," MacKenzie shows that he has in mind here relatively lengthy passages of the Bible—paragraphs, discourses, and chapters taken as a whole, or perhaps whole books if they are short ones—as distinct from *discrete propositions*. But this fails to do justice to what the *relator* said, and indeed, makes his critically important explanation rule out nothing but a man of straw. For there are probably no advocates of restricted inerrancy who *claim* that whole "sections" of the Bible give "merely natural knowledge (and [are] fallible)". MacKenzie himself evidently thinks there are no such "sections"; but he also makes it clear (see the sentence beginning "It is only in this respect . . .") that he thinks there are errors in Scripture. All of these alleged errors, according to MacKenzie and others who restrict inerrancy, are of course *propositions*. For only of a proposition can either truth or falsity be predicated. Indeed, the whole point at issue between the respective defenders of restricted and unrestricted inerrancy is whether some biblical propositions, correctly understood, express mistaken judgments on the part of the inspired writers. Now, since it is in the very nature of propositions that they can be separated and quantified, the existence of false propositions expressed as judgments of the inspired authors would necessarily constitute "a *material limitation* of the truth of Scripture." Therefore, in denying

45 Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 119, n. 31.

that the “salvific” reference in *Dei Verbum*, 11, implies any such limitation, the *relator* is denying that this conciliar text teaches restricted inerrancy.

The practical implications of a restricted view of inerrancy are immense. For instance, to start with the idea that only what is profitable for salvation is being affirmed in a given biblical text, so that one tries to deduce what, if anything, the author might be affirming in that text by first assessing whether or not its content and subject-matter appear to be “salvifically” relevant, reverses the correct and rational order of exegesis. Catholic interpreters who read *Dei Verbum*, 11, correctly will begin, rather, with the faith-based awareness that whatever is affirmed in a given biblical text is there “for the sake of our salvation”. Accordingly, they will *first* seek to understand what the biblical author affirms in a given text *and then* inquire as to how (not whether) that affirmation has some relevance to God’s plan of salvation—at least in conjunction with others in that passage if not necessarily in isolation.

Meaning, after all, plainly precedes value *epistemically*, in the order of knowing. It is common sense that we first need to know and understand *what* someone is affirming before we can begin to evaluate the truth, importance, or usefulness of that affirmation. Once normal, common-sense linguistic rules for identifying a writer’s affirmations are set aside in the way we have been criticizing, the way is opened to widely varying and subjective interpretations of the Bible. Indeed, far from *learning* from God’s Word what is relevant for our salvation, exegetes who operate with assumptions of restricted inerrancy will necessarily bring to the text—and impose upon it—their own preconceived assumptions as to what sorts of information and ideas could or could not in principle be relevant for salvation. Exegete A will find little or no salvific value in a passage of Scripture which for Exegete B contains deep spiritual import.

This radical new hermeneutic bids fair to penetrate our Catholic doctrinal patrimony at a very deep level. The Church’s creeds and doctrines all have a biblical basis. And the very confidence and firmness with which the popes and councils appealed to that basis was in turn founded on their unshakeable belief in the Bible’s *unrestricted* inerrancy. So if that foundational belief is now conceded to be mistaken, how much strength and reliability will be left in the magisterial superstructure that has been so painstakingly erected on top of it? Indeed, would it not be logical for theologians who hold to restricted inerrancy to begin assessing the “salvific value” of each doctrine of the Church, just as they now evaluate each passage of Scripture? Restricting biblical inerrancy appears to undermine what the Church teaches about the infallibility of her magisterium.

For a concrete example of how these subjective *a priori* judgments of salvific relevance or irrelevance can make even articles of the Christian creed dissolve into doubt, we need look no further than the treatment of Jesus’s virginal conception in

the writings of Raymond Brown, probably the most renowned American biblical scholar since Vatican II and an outspoken partisan of restricted inerrancy.

The Church has, from its first formulations of the faith, taught that Jesus was conceived solely by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary.⁴⁶ This doctrine is based on the assertions of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Christian commentators for almost two millennia have recognized that Matthew is giving us a straightforward affirmation or assertion when, after telling us of the angel's reassurance to Joseph that the child Mary is carrying "is of the Holy Spirit," he states directly that Joseph "did not know her till she brought forth her first-born son."⁴⁷

Brown, however, never grants "affirmed" status to this clear gospel statement. In his *The Birth of the Messiah*,⁴⁸ he admits that Matthew "thought that Jesus had been virginally conceived."⁴⁹ He also admits that both Matthew and Luke "regarded the virginal conception as historical"⁵⁰ and, indeed, that they "presuppose a biological virginity."⁵¹ He even admits it to be "lucidly clear" that Matthew "believed in Mary's bodily virginity before the birth of Jesus."⁵² But Brown avoids stating that Matthew actually *affirms* or *asserts* this fact. The reason for this reluctance is not hard to discern. Such an admission, in the light of *Dei Verbum* 11's teaching that the Holy Spirit affirms all that the sacred writers affirm, would discredit Brown's strenuously argued exegetical thesis—namely, that "the scientifically controllable biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of the virginal conception unresolved."⁵³

Brown casts further doubt on the reliability of Matthew's statement by applying the very *a priori* litmus test that we have been criticizing: is the subject-matter "salvific" or not? Brown says "a faithful Catholic" considering whether or not to believe Matthew's testimony that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived, "would have to ask" this question: "Should one rank the biological manner of Jesus's conception as a truth God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation?"⁵⁴

46 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 496–498.

47 Matt. 1:20, 25.

48 Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

49 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 528; emphasis added.

50 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 517; emphasis added.

51 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 529; emphasis added.

52 Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973), 31, n. 37; emphasis added.

53 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 527; emphasis in original.

54 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 528, n. 28. See my "The Truth and Salvific Purpose of Sacred Scripture According to *Dei Verbum*, Article 11," *Living Tradition* 59 (July 1995): 8–9, nn. 27–28.

Brown offers no answer to the question he poses. Nor does he suggest what sort of criteria would be needed to answer the question objectively. He did in fact profess his own personal belief in Jesus's conception without a human father. But he based his profession, not on the evidence of the Scriptures, but on the basis of Tradition and the Church's magisterium.⁵⁵ The trouble is that what the Tradition and the magisterium teach is based exclusively on the prior witness of Scripture. The Church's Fathers, Doctors, popes, and bishops have all taught that Catholics must believe in the virginal conception simply because Matthew and Luke tell us it happened. But Brown holds that those Church authorities were mistaken in making that inference, because he denies the dogma upon which they relied—namely, unrestricted biblical inerrancy. Thus, by proceeding from an assumption of the limited inerrancy of Scripture, Brown's exegetical work reached conclusions that undermine the biblical foundations of this pivotal Church doctrine, not to mention the logical underpinnings of his own professed faith in the virginal conception.

Further Objections to Unrestricted Inerrancy

Rather than trying to limit Scripture's inerrancy on the basis of a prior judgment regarding the presence or absence of "salvific" content in various texts, some advocates of restricted inerrancy argue that the Council implicitly distinguished between the sacred writers' "stronger" statements, which are inerrant, and their "weaker" statements, which are not.

It is true that both the text of *Dei Verbum*, 11, and the *relator's* explanation of it emphasize that it is what the sacred writers *affirm* (*asserere*) that is protected from error. Therefore, some argue that the Council is implicitly conceding that an inspired writer can sometimes fall into error—but without *affirming* his error. Again, with this way of reading *Dei Verbum*, 11, the issue becomes what is being "affirmed" by the sacred text, and how to distinguish that from what the authors do not intend to affirm.

In order to distinguish "affirmed" from "non-affirmed" biblical statements, those who argue for this version of restricted inerrancy appeal not to an *a priori* judgment as to what seems relevant to salvation in the passage concerned, but rather, to the greater and lesser *degrees of commitment* seemingly shown by the sacred authors to the various things they say are true. When seeking to discern whether or not a given biblical statement is protected from error, the exegete who uses this criterion will ask, "How *strongly, deliberately, or decisively* is this statement expressed?"

This approach, too, conflicts with the text of the conciliar document and the explanations given to it by the conciliar *relator*. As we have already noted, *any*

55 "I think this is infallibly taught . . . I think this [Jesus's conception without a human father] is so." Raymond E. Brown, *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 27, n. 11 and 36, n. 25.

erroneous statement coming from an inspired writer—whether “affirmed” or “non-affirmed”—would necessarily be a “material limitation” of the Bible’s truth. And the *relator* made a point of telling the Council fathers that the text before them was not to be understood as allowing for any such limitation. In addition, any attempt to make this distinction between “stronger” and “weaker” statements in the Scriptures, like the attempt to decide *a priori* what does and does not have salvific value, is in practice likely to open a Pandora’s box of widely varying and subjective applications.

Most importantly, those who invoke Vatican II to justify their claim that the inspired writers sometimes make mistakes, but without “affirming” them, invariably fail to notice that the last two of *Dei Verbum* 11’s four Latin sentences—those that explicitly mention the Bible’s freedom from error and salvific purpose—are not the only ones relevant to inerrancy. As we emphasized at the start of this article, inerrancy is not a “self-standing” dogma, but a consequence of the more fundamental revealed truth of integral divine authorship—with “authorship” being understood very fully and directly. It is precisely this sense of divine authorship that Vatican II explicitly confirms in the *second* sentence of *Dei Verbum*, 11. The Council fathers state here that while the hagiographers were “true authors” who “used their own faculties and powers,”⁵⁶ they nevertheless wrote “all those things *and only those things* that [God] wanted.”⁵⁷ Immediately following this, the third (and much better known) sentence begins with the words, “Since, therefore (*Cum ergo*) everything asserted by the sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit.”

The word “therefore” is nearly always neglected by commentators, but it clearly means that the kind of inerrancy taught in this third sentence is the kind that follows logically from Leo XIII’s rigorous definition of divine authorship which has just been repeated word-for-word in the second sentence. And that of course can only be *unrestricted* inerrancy. For God could not have “wanted” the human authors to utter anything false, whether by “affirming” it or stating it less decisively. Indeed, this is confirmed by the first footnote to *Dei Verbum*, 11, which directs us to the principal magisterial sources asserting the Bible’s divine authorship and explaining what it means. Among those sources is a Pontifical Biblical Commission decision that explicitly rules out the idea that God is the author of all the hagiographers’ “affirmations,” but not of all their “statements.” The commission’s decree, confirmed by Pope Benedict XV, affirms that according to “the Catholic dogma of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Sacred Scriptures . . . all that the sacred writer affirms, states, or implies must be held as affirmed, stated or implied by the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁸

56 Lat.: “Veri auctores . . . facultatibus ac viribus suis utentes.”

57 Lat.: “Ea omnia eaque sola, quae Ipse veller”; emphasis added.

58 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Response On the Parousia or the Second Coming of Our Lord*

Why, then, did the Council's text and *relatio* on inerrancy emphasize what Scripture "affirms" and "teaches," if, as we have argued, the reason for this emphasis was not to make a distinction between "stronger" statements (protected from error) and "weaker" ones that might be erroneous?

First, in considering the reasons why the *relator* and the other conciliar fathers used and emphasized *asserere*, we need to note that in Latin it is hard to find two words that clearly differentiate between stronger ways of saying that something is the case ("affirmations") and weaker ways ("mere statements"). The verb *enuntiare* is sometimes used for "state"; but Latin-English dictionaries include stronger senses such as "declare," "affirm," and "assert" among its meanings, as well as weaker ones such as "say" and "express." So, the fact that "assert" and "affirm" are strong verbs in English does not justify the conclusion that *asserere* has been used in *Dei Verbum*, 11, in order to distinguish "stronger" biblical statements from "weaker" ones.

In fact, the drafting history of this sentence reveals a different reason. It should first be noted that, according to the *relator*, both *asserere* and *docere* ("teach") were to be understood as referring to the same parts or aspects of the Bible's overall content: "The word *teach*, which refers to those things which are truly affirmed, is to be retained."⁵⁹ In other words, *Dei Verbum*, 11, means that whatever is taught in Scripture is affirmed, and vice versa. During the deliberations over the document, Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez had proposed using the word "teach" to indicate what it is that the biblical authors do "without error." He explained his proposal this way:

Reason: the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is better expressed by speaking of the formal criterion of *teaching*, since it is according to that criterion that no error can be found. For in another sense, that is, the material sense, it is possible for expressions to be used by the sacred writer which are erroneous in themselves, but which, however, he does not wish to teach.⁶⁰

The *relator* told the Council fathers that the doctrinal commission had accepted this proposal "substantially."⁶¹ Thus we can take what Silva Henríquez

in the Letters of St. Paul the Apostle (June 18, 1915) (EB 415; DS 3629; SD, 207–208; Lat.: "Dogmate item catholico de inspiratione et inerrantia sacrarum Scripturarum, quo omne id, quod hagiographus asserit, enuntiat, insinuat, retineri debet assertum, enuntiatum, insinuatum a Spiritu Sancto").

59 *Acta Vaticani II*, vol. 4, pt. 5, 709 (Lat.: "Servetur vox docere, quæ agit de illis quæ proprie asseruntur").

60 *Acta Vaticani II*, vol. 3, pt. 3, 799 (Lat.: "Ratio: doctrina de inerrantia Scripturarum melius exprimitur si de formali ratione *docendi*, secundum quam nullus error inveniri potest, loquitur, quia alio sensu, i.e., materiali, possunt locutiones de se erronæ ab hagiographo adhiberi, quas tamen docere non vult"); emphasis in original.

61 *Acta Vaticani II*, vol. 3, pt. 3, 92 (Lat.: "quoad substantiam").

means as a guide to what the Council means. And we can see that he does not set up any dichotomy between a biblical author's "teachings" and his mere "statements," with inerrancy being guaranteed only for the former. Rather, his dichotomy is between what is taught and what is merely "used" (*adhiberi*) by the sacred writers, with the latter category possibly including expressions (*locutiones*) that are "materially" erroneous.

It would seem that "using" an erroneous expression without teaching or affirming it to be true could occur in one of two basic ways. One way would be citing someone else's words or ideas without expressing any judgment that they are true. The other would be the employment of a literary genre in which a series of verbs that are "materially" in the past tense are not intended to constitute a strictly historical narrative, or one in which certain words or expressions are not intended in their "material"—that is, their proper or literal—sense. For instance, "materially" the book of Ecclesiastes begins with an identification of the author as "the Preacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem" (that is, Solomon),⁶² and the Book of Judith starts out depicting Nebuchadnezzar as King of Assyria, living at Nineveh, when he was in fact King of Babylon—and at a time when Nineveh had already been destroyed (in 612 B. C.) by his Father Nabopolassar. However, taking into account the ancient Near Eastern literary conventions, modern scholars are agreed that the authors would not have been formally teaching what their words "materially" expressed: they were "using" these names as symbols or archetypes. Any number of other similar examples could of course be given.

In short, we should see the Council's choice of the verbs *asserere* and *docere* in *Dei Verbum*, 11, as ruling out the kind of superficial literalism that takes insufficient account of the Bible's diverse literary genres. It does *not* imply that we should draw a distinction between the hagiographers' stronger ("affirmed") and weaker (supposedly "non-affirmed") statements and consider only the former to be immune from error. For even if this distinction could in practice be made with consistency and objectivity, any such hermeneutic of *Dei Verbum* 11's third Latin sentence will be in discontinuity not only with the whole of Catholic Tradition, but even with the preceding sentence of this same dogmatic constitution. For, as we have seen, the "ancient and constant faith of the Church," reaffirmed in that previous sentence, assures us that all the sacred writers' statements, along with all their "non-statements" (questions, aspirations, prayers, and the like) have God—who cannot err—as their author.

Thus does the whole of *Dei Verbum*, 11, not just its last two sentences, uphold the Catholic dogma of unrestricted biblical inerrancy. There is no sound basis for reading the Council's teaching in discontinuity with this perennial and fundamental point of our faith.⁶³

62 Eccl. 1:1.

63 There are other objections that might be raised against my twofold claim that the doctrine of

unrestricted biblical inerrancy is both true and upheld by Vatican Council II. I have answered them to the best of my ability in my earlier article, “Does Vatican Council II Allow for Errors in Sacred Scripture?” available in a slightly amplified form at www.rtforum.org/lt/lt145.html. To the objection that I do not explain how the many specific and well-known biblical problems can be solved without conceding error on the part of the sacred writer, see section 2.2 of that earlier article. (Also see the helpful article by Paul Zerafa (“The Limits of Biblical Inerrancy,” *Angelicum* 39 (1962): 92–119), republished in this volume of *Letter & Spirit*.) At section 2.1 of my earlier article, I address the objection that contrary to my interpretation of *Dei Verbum*, 11, there are in fact many things in the Bible that have no relevance to salvation. Finally, the following objection can be raised: If, as I claim, the Council does *not* mean to teach that inerrancy is restricted to a “salvation-relevant” subset of all biblical propositions, then why did it insist—against initial objections from conservative council fathers—on inserting a reference to the Bible’s salvific purpose in the sentence that explicitly affirms inerrancy? Why even mention salvific purpose in this context if inerrancy does not depend on it? Section 2.4 of my earlier article offers an answer to this question.