

THE GOSPELS AS HISTORY

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It is not infrequent in contemporary biblical exegesis that one finds assertions that certain aspects of the life of Christ as recorded in the gospels are unhistorical. With striking confidence it is declared that particular events and teachings are the outgrowth of the evangelists' imaginations, or a retrospective projection of events and sayings, which amplify the personality of Christ in the light of the resurrection.

Thus it is alleged, for example, that the infancy narratives in Luke and Matthew are creations of the sacred writers in the light of some parallel Old Testament events, and that this is a literary device to give status to the birth of Jesus. Consequently, according to some exegetes, there is no historical basis for the message of the angels to the shepherds, or the visit of the magi to Bethlehem. The historical authenticity of central doctrines of the faith such as the virginal conception of Christ, Jesus's self-knowledge as the pre-existing Son of God, the fact that he instituted the priesthood and the episcopacy are frequently impugned—doctrines the certainty of which the Church has always seen affirmed in the gospel accounts.

What we are confronted with is essentially a denial of the fundamental historical character of the gospels. It is an attitude of mind which is nourished by several different influences. At one level there is an implicit denial of the supernatural character of the incarnation. At another, the influence of the Bultmann school of exegesis ("form criticism") is still very much with us. This postulates a complete discontinuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, with the consequent need to "demythologize" the gospel accounts to get to the basic kerygma. To explain the genesis of the gospels, form criticism affirmed that the environment in which the gospels crystallized was the primitive Christian community. This community, form critics say, was "anonymous" and "creative," and was influenced by contiguous pagan cultures in such a manner that it provided the type of popular setting in which legends are born. The gospel stories are thus a product of "faith" and not of history, because faith and scientific history are incompatible. This exegetical approach, as can be clearly seen, undermines both the historicity of the gospels and the doctrine of divine inspiration of Scripture as the Church has always understood this charism.

How important is it for our faith that we be certain the gospels are truly historical?

Catholic faith is based on God's revelation of himself to man. This revelation centers on the incarnation, life, and teaching of Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Word made flesh. We are reminded by *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's

constitution on divine revelation that "God graciously arranged that the things he had once revealed for the salvation of all peoples should remain in their entirety, throughout the ages, and be transmitted to all generations."¹ It was part of this design that, at the prompting of the Spirit, a written record would be compiled of the life and teachings of Christ. Among these inspired writings, the gospels have a special place because, according to the same conciliar text, "they are our principal source for the life and teachings of the Incarnate Word, our Saviour."²

Consequently, if the historicity of the gospels were controverted in any way, the very basis of our faith would be undermined. It is not surprising then that the magisterium of the Church has diligently defended the historical reality of these writings.³ Historicity is a fundamental characteristic of the Judeo-Christian revelation. The Bible presents a history of salvation in which people, events and institutions are portrayed in a space-time framework. Christ is the central figure of this history; his life on earth, his actions and his words are, at the same time, the subject both of history and of faith.

The gospel message that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God, is a testimony of faith which has a historical reference and implies a historical event. At the same time, the historical fact of Jesus of Nazareth is something which is not fully comprehensible at the rational level alone; it is only by reference to faith that we begin to understand the implications of the essentially supernatural reality of the Word Incarnate.

For the Catholic exegete and believer, the distinction between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith" has no validity. They are one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, the knowledge of whose life and teaching is faithfully transmitted to us by the Church. My faith assures me that the personality of Jesus which the gospels portray, his life and teachings which have been taught to me by the Church, are true, and that they have not been falsified or deformed in any way by the process of transmission. On the other hand, critical research can help us to deepen our knowledge of Christ's life and mission, by giving us more historical background to the gospel tradition which culminated in the literary record of the evangelists. However, access to Jesus through the gospels as an exegetical task cannot be reduced to mere literary and historical criticism; it must seek faith and be supported by it.

1 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (November 18, 1965), 7, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchar (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 19–33.

2 *Dei Verbum*, 18. For an excellent survey of the teaching of the Catholic magisterium in this area, see Edith Black, "Historicity of the Bible," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (December 1980): 12–23; (January 1981): 24–32.

3 See *Enchiridion Biblicum: Documenti della Chiesa sulla Sacra Scrittura* [Documents of the Church on Sacred Scripture], 2nd ed., ed. Alfio Filippi and Erminio Lora (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1993), 558–560. Hereafter abbreviated *EB*.

From a Catholic point of view, since God is the principal author of Scripture, the dogma of biblical inspiration guarantees the historicity of the doings and sayings of Jesus Christ, while recognizing at the same time that the differences between the four gospels give rise to certain difficulties. Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, helped overcome some of these difficulties through his recognition of the validity of applying the theory of literary genres to the Bible.⁴ Research along these lines led to the conviction that these four canonical books constituted a unique genre in the field of literature, and even within the Bible itself. Without ceasing to have a general historical character, they could not, however, be fitted easily into the category of either classical or modern history.

Nevertheless, as Vatican II points out, there are different ways of writing history, all of which have their own validity.⁵ The fact that the gospels do not give us a life of Christ according to the canons of modern historiography in no way detracts from the truth of what they tell us.

Historical validity is intrinsically related to the supernatural message. The primary objective of the evangelists was to transmit the good news of salvation for the benefit of future generations, as drawn from the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. The literary form they intended was not biographical, but the form of preaching—announcing the message of salvation in such a manner, on the basis of historical events, as to evoke a response of faith in those who would hear it or read it.⁶ It was a supernatural message, but its capacity to convince was intrinsically related to its historical validity.

Stages in the Redaction of the Gospels

Research in the present century has shown that the redaction of the gospels was in fact the result of a much more complex process than was envisaged previously. This was confirmed by the instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the historicity of the gospels.⁷ This instruction throws immense light on the much controverted question of the gospels as history, and consequently its principal characteristics deserve to be recalled.

4 Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [Inspired by the Divine Spirit], Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies (September 30, 1943) (EB 558–560).

5 *Dei Verbum*, 12. The Theological Commission of Vatican II, which drafted this document, clarifies that the history we find in the Gospels is authentic history (*historicitas proprie dicta*). See *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* [Synodal Acts of the Ecumenical Council Vatican II], 32 vols. (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–), vol. 3, pt. 3, 101.

6 *Dei Verbum*, 19.

7 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* [Holy Mother Church], Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels (April 21, 1964), in *Scripture Documents*, 223–235. The translation used in this article is from the Appendix to Augustin Bea, *The Study of the Synoptic Gospels: New Approaches and Outlooks*, ed. Joseph A. Fitzmyer (London: Chapman, 1965), 79–89.

Looking at the gospels as purely human documents, the scriptural evidence is very clear that the primitive Christian community was not in any way anonymous, but one that is well known to us, which is guided by the apostles. We see how Peter acts and preaches as head of the apostolic college and of the newly born Church.⁸

The apostles and the gospel writers had a real interest in the historical dimension of Christ's life and teaching. This attitude is reflected clearly at the very beginning of Luke's gospel.⁹ The apostles were very conscious that the reliability of what they preached derived from the fact that they had received this teaching from the lips of Christ himself, and that they were eye-witnesses of the events they recounted. "You shall be my witnesses," Christ had said to them.¹⁰ After his ascension, as a guarantee of their authenticity, they frequently referred to themselves as precisely that, direct "witnesses" of the doings and teachings of the Lord.¹¹

The Biblical Commission instruction outlines the context in which the historical character of the gospels should be defended and explained. This context is apostolic tradition, and, specifically, the three stages by which the life of Jesus has come down to us.

The first of these stages is the historical life and teaching of Christ himself, together with his own interpretation of the salvific significance of what he did and taught. During this time Christ chose disciples who followed him from the beginning of his public life, and lived in close intimacy with him; who heard his teaching and saw his miracles, and who understood the salvific purpose of all of this.

The second stage is the preaching of the apostles, who were guided into all truth by the Holy Spirit.¹² Also, through his special assistance, they were able to recall all Christ had taught them,¹³ and, in the light of the resurrection, were able to see the full significance of the deeds and teaching of Christ. The instruction tells us that they faithfully explained his life and words, and passed on to their listeners all that Our Lord had taught them.

In the third stage of this apostolic tradition, the evangelists, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, drawing on this historical and doctrinal tradition, wrote down "that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures."¹⁴ From the many things handed down, the Biblical Commission instruction tells us, the sacred writers selected some of the events and teachings; they made a synthesis of others; still others were explicated

8 See Acts 2:14–20; 3:12–26; 4:8–12.

9 See Luke 1:1–3.

10 Acts 1:8; compare Luke 24:48.

11 Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32.

12 See John 16:13.

13 See John 14:26.

14 *Dei Verbum*, 11.

bearing in mind the situations of the different communities. Hence the variety and individuality of the four gospel traditions.¹⁵

These same three stages of apostolic tradition are reiterated in *Dei Verbum*, where it deals with the historicity of the gospels. It also repeats the three elements which characterize the work of the gospel writers—selection, synthesis and explanation.¹⁶

The Starting Point for Exegesis

For Catholic exegesis, then, the historical truth of the gospels is “a principle to be taken as a starting point for all work of interpretation of the sacred books; it is not, therefore, a conclusion or end product of critical research.”¹⁷

If it is to be truly theological, exegesis must throw light on the gospels considered as divinely inspired writings, that is, it must have something to say from the point of view of the hermeneutical criteria of the faith, otherwise it is a merely human science which never penetrates the theological depth of the inspired word. In his book, *The Study of the Synoptic Gospels*, Augustin Cardinal Bea adumbrates a number of principles which lead to a deeper understanding of the historicity of the Gospels viewed as inspired books.¹⁸ How is the historical character of the gospels affected by the fact that they are inspired writings, that is, that God is their principal literary author? The fact of inspiration leads directly to the conclusion that “the gospels not only enjoy a genuine historical credibility in what they affirm and in the way in which they affirm it, but also that perfect form of it which is called inerrancy.”¹⁹

However, at first sight there are many parallel passages in the different synoptic accounts where there appear to be contradictions, for example the healing of the centurion’s servant, or the description of the Sermon on the Mount, both of which are recorded with significant differences in Matthew and Luke. It might also be reasonably asked, if in such a centrally important event as the institution of the Eucharist there is quite a variation in the words of the formula of institution, how can we be sure that the evangelists are reliable authors?

Many of these problems can be solved, as Pius XII recommended, by a deeper penetration of the doctrine of divine inspiration from the point of view of instrumental causality.²⁰ According to this approach the human author, although under the influence of the Holy Spirit, leaves the imprint of his own character

15 In Bea, *Synoptic Gospels*, 82–85.

16 *Dei Verbum*, 19.

17 Paul Cardinal Taguchi, “The Study of Sacred Scripture,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (May 15, 1975): 6.

18 Bea, *Synoptic Gospels*, 45–51.

19 Bea, *Synoptic Gospels*, 45.

20 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (EB 556).

and distinctive genius on the document he writes, no less than any other human author. And yet, by divine design, he writes exactly what God wills and only what he wills.²¹ The doctrine of instrumental causality, articulated so clearly by Pius XII, is affirmed again by *Dei Verbum*,²² avoiding, however, the type of technical terminology which would be inappropriate in a document which was intended to be primarily pastoral in orientation: "To compose the books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more."²³

As we have seen, in spite of the desire of the sacred authors to be faithful to the truth, differences are to be expected in the way the gospel message is presented. This is so in the first place because, as already explained, the gospels are a form of literary "preaching" rather than biography.

As Bea has pointed out, many of the differences in the gospel accounts can be explained by basic human psychology. It is a well-known phenomenon that the capacity of human observation to grasp particular events is quite limited and varies considerably from person to person. Precisely because of the principle of divine condescension, we can expect similar variation in reportage of the same events in the life of Christ. These differences, however, can be such that they complete one another.²⁴

The differences between parallel passages are due not only to limitations of observation and memory, but arise also because of differences in the narrative skills of the various writers. Indeed one of the points highlighted by *Dei Verbum* was the fact that the Scripture writers were authentic authors (*veri auctores*) with all that that implies for the reflection of human personality of the hagiographer in his written work. Matthew writes with a keen eye to the implications of what he says for a predominantly Hebrew audience. Luke has a unique capacity to capture the compassion of Christ in a number of incidents related more soberly in other accounts. The same evangelist shows a particular refinement in relating incidents involving women (for example his telling of the events related to the Samaritan woman, the widow of Nain, and the woman taken in adultery).

Another factor which has to be taken into account is that we are considering writers of the Near East of two thousand years ago. This was a specific culture with a particular outlook and mentality, very different from our own. It would therefore

21 Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* [The God of All Providence], Encyclical Letter on the Study of Scripture (November 18, 1893) (EB 125).

22 *Dei Verbum*, 11.

23 *Dei Verbum*, 11.

24 Bea, *Synoptic Gospels*, 51–54.

be perverse to judge these writers according to the standards of contemporary historical science developed in Western culture.²⁵

It should therefore not surprise us to find these differences in the gospel narratives. Indeed God used them to provide us with a richer perception of the truths of salvation because of the complementary nature of these writings. The treasures of divine revelation are inexhaustible,²⁶ and thus human language or literature is incapable of conveying all the riches of the inspired word.

What should be the attitude of a believer when confronted with such difficulties in the gospel text? The Catholic who accepts the divinely guided teaching of the Church on the inspiration of Scripture will respond with that certitude which faith alone can give. St. Augustine forewarns us that God allows these difficulties to be scattered through the biblical text so that, on the one hand, we would study it with greater diligence, and on the other, being more conscious of our intellectual limitations, we would approach it with greater humility.²⁷ In addition, there is no reason for any fear or inferiority complex in relation to the findings of the sciences—historical, philological, archaeological, and the like. It is the same God who is the author of Scripture and of nature, and, as Pope Leo XIII pointed out in his great biblical encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, “truth can never contradict truth.”²⁸

The assent of faith to the truths transmitted in the gospels precludes any question of doubt about their certainty. Tradition, we are reminded by Vatican II, “transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit,” and “thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone.”²⁹ Consequently, the Catholic exegete will, for example, approach the study of the virginal conception of Christ in the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives with the prior advantage of knowing that this truth is part of the deposit of faith. His exegesis will thus inevitably shed more light than that of the biblical scholar who begins from a perspective of doubt or skepticism about this mystery.

While the Pontifical Biblical Commission instruction considerably increased our understanding of the way in which the gospels are to be understood as historical, the most authoritative statement of the magisterium on this topic is, of course, *Dei Verbum*. This conciliar document confirms the historicity of the gospels in its fullest sense, in continuity with the previous teaching of the magisterium.

25 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (EB 558–559). See also Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, in Bea, *Synoptic Gospels*, 85–87.

26 See Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis* [The Human Race], Encyclical Letter on Certain False Opinions Threatening to Undermine the Foundations of Catholic Doctrine (August 12, 1950) (EB 611).

27 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (EB 563).

28 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (EB 131).

29 *Dei Verbum*, 9.

The Church's "Absolute Certainty" Concerning the Gospels

The theme of the historicity of the gospels is introduced in *Dei Verbum* with a certain solemnity of tone: "Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute certainty maintained, and continues to maintain [*tenuit ac tenet*], that the four Gospels, whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among us, really did and taught for their salvation until the day when he was taken up."³⁰

It is of particular interest to recall the editorial itinerary of this important paragraph. During the process of redacting this conciliar document, which went through five different drafts spread over the life-time of the Council (1962–1965), some council fathers proposed that the clause "maintained and continues to maintain" (*tenuit ac tenet*) be substituted by "believed and continues to believe" (*credidit et credit*), since this was a truth which had always been accepted in the Church through an act of faith. Nevertheless the council's Theological Commission, which was entrusted with the task of redrafting the schema of the constitution, replied that *tenuit ac tenet* had been written because in this way the idea was more clearly affirmed that the historicity of the gospels was a truth which could be accessed both by faith and reason, and not just by faith alone.³¹ This argument was accepted and approved by the Fathers and confirmed by Pope Paul VI in the definitive text of *Dei Verbum*.

The historicity of the gospels is thus presented to us in *Dei Verbum* as a datum which has been, and continues to be, an object of the faith of the Church. It is therefore a truth which claims the full assent of faith of the believing Christian, even though there are objective difficulties in understanding it, both from the point of view of the internal structure of the Scriptures (relating texts among themselves), as well as from the scientific confirmation of the events narrated. As a datum of faith, it is an essential premise of theological research, especially in the exegetical area, since theology as a science is developed from first principles which are the principles of the faith.

At the same time, the apologetic intent of giving rational support to faith in the historicity of the gospels, as underlined by the conciliar text, is a valid one. Exegesis has been encouraged by *Dei Verbum* to present testimony which endorses gospel historicity, objective historical proofs which oblige a rational adherence to it. Rational justification does not make faith in the historicity of the gospels vain, but demonstrates the appropriateness of accepting it. Faith, for its part, is necessary to adhere to this truth, overcoming the existing obscurities and human resistance to admit a reality which escapes us because of its transcendence.³²

³⁰ *Dei Verbum*, 19.

³¹ *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti*, vol. 4, pt. 5, 722–723.

³² See M. A. Tabet, "Cristologia y Historicidad en *Dei Verbum*" [Christology and Historicity

The constitution affirms that “the Gospels are the principal witness we have to the life and teaching of our Saviour, the Word made Flesh.”³³ The question of the historical truth of the gospels is thus not just a matter which affects the Christian apologetic and fundamental theology; it is the solid bedrock on which Christology, ecclesiology, exegesis of the New Testament, and other doctrinal and pastoral areas are firmly grounded.

By following closely the history of the redaction of paragraph 19 of *Dei Verbum*, one is left in no doubt about the desire of the Council fathers to emphasize clearly the historical nature of the gospels. As we have already seen, the first sentence of this paragraph contains the phrase “whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms.” This was introduced in the final draft of the schema of *Dei Verbum*, as a result of the direct intervention of Paul VI.

A number of Council fathers had raised the question of the inadequacy of the phrase at the end of paragraph 19 of the fourth schema, the penultimate draft, to express the historicity of the gospels: the gospels were written in such a way, it says, so that “they always tell us true and sincere things about Jesus” (*ita semper ut vera et sincera de Iesu nobis communicant*).³⁴ The Holy Father, unhappy with the direction which the debates in the Council were taking, had a letter drawn up by the Secretary of State,³⁵ and sent to the president of the Theological Commission, in which he invited commission members to reconsider, among other points, the question of the historical truth of the gospels. He requested that this doctrine would be explicitly articulated, and suggested that the phrase *vera et sincera* of the penultimate schema be replaced by the phrase *vera seu historica fidei digna* (true; worthy of historical belief). “It would seem,” the letter continues, “that the first does not guarantee the real historicity of the gospels; and on this point, as is obvious, the Holy Father could not approve a formula which would leave the slightest doubt about the historicity of these most holy books.”³⁶

The Theological Commission studied this suggestion, and proposed the phrase “whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms,” which was approved by the Council fathers. In this context it is of particular interest to recall what *Dei Verbum* affirms about the consequences of the divine inspiration of Scripture, a point which has no small significance for the historicity of the gospels. In *Dei Verbum* we read: “Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of

in *Dei Verbum*], in *Cristo, Hijo de Dios y Redentor del Hombre* [Christ, the Son of God and Redeemer of Man] (Pamplona: University of Navarre, 1982): 302–306.

33 *Dei Verbum*, 19.

34 *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti*, vol. 4, pt. 5, 723.

35 Dated October 18, 1965.

36 See G. Caprile, “Tre Emendamenti allo Schema sulla Rivelazione” [Three Amendments to the Schema on Revelation] in *Civiltà Cattolica*, 117:1 (1966): 216–231, at 228.

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.”³⁷

It is no accident that this text on the truth of Scripture, together with the text on historicity, constituted two of the most debated points in the whole of the Council discussion on the text of *Dei Verbum*. The inerrancy of Scripture was in fact one of the other points which Paul VI draws attention to in the letter of October 18, 1965. His concern was again to ensure that the final text of *Dei Verbum* would not leave itself open to ambiguity of interpretation about the nature of the truths contained in the inspired books. Many of the Council fathers had expressed concern that the text of the penultimate draft could be interpreted as saying that scriptural inerrancy extended only to those affirmations which related directly to the religious and moral teaching of the Bible. As a result of the intervention of the Holy Father, the text was revised to make it clear that the salvific truth which the Bible contains referred to all the affirmations of Scripture.³⁸

Some biblical commentators have tried to make a case to show that *Dei Verbum* teaches a restricted doctrine of scriptural inerrancy by comparison with previous documents of the Magisterium. However, a careful study of the redaction of the conciliar text, together with a detailed analysis of the documents referred to at this point, provide no basis for attenuating the scope of the traditional concept of biblical inerrancy.³⁹ Gospel historicity and inerrancy are correlative and coextensive concepts. They either stand or fall together. From what we have seen, there can be no doubt that, in *Dei Verbum*, they mutually reinforce one another, while making due allowances for the use of different literary genres by the inspired writers.

Twenty years after the Council, Pope John Paul II, in *Dominum et Vivificantem*, his encyclical on the Holy Spirit, reaffirms the historicity of the gospels and situates it in a wider theological perspective.⁴⁰ He reminds us that the Holy Spirit is always present in the Church as “teacher of the same good news that Christ proclaimed.” The Pope gives us an authoritative interpretation of John 14:26 (“He will *teach* you all things and *bring to your remembrance* all that I have said to you”),⁴¹ which has profound implications for the historical authenticity of the gospel texts. He says:

37 *Dei Verbum*, 11.

38 *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti*, vol. 4, pt. 5, 708.

39 See G. Aranda, “Santo Tomás en la Constitución Dei Verbum” [St. Thomas in the Constitution *Dei Verbum*], *Scripta Theologica* 11 (1977): 403–407.

40 Pope John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* [Lord and Giver of Life], Encyclical Letter on the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World (May 18, 1986), in *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, ed. J. Michael Miller, C.S.B. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2001), 244–302.

41 John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 4; emphasis in original.

The words “he will teach” and “bring to your remembrance” mean not only that he, in his own particular way, will continue to inspire the spreading of the Gospel of salvation but also that he will help people to understand the correct meaning of the content of Christ’s message; they mean that he will ensure continuity and identity of understanding in the midst of changing conditions and circumstances. The Holy Spirit, then, will ensure that in the Church there will always continue the same truth which the apostles heard from the Master.⁴²

There is thus no question of any difference between the meaning given to the apostolic preaching by the gospel writers and the way in which the Church understands it today. This is because it is the Holy Spirit, the soul of the Church who leads us into all truth, who is the permanent guarantor of the historicity of the gospels down through the centuries.

42 John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 4.