

VATICAN II ON THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

~: Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J. ~:

Fordham University

In the Catholic understanding, the Bible is not self-sufficient. It does not determine its own contents, vouch for its own inspiration, or interpret itself. The Bible is God's gift to the Church, which is its custodian and authoritative interpreter. The Councils of Trent and Vatican I clearly made these points. In summary fashion Vatican II declared that tradition, Scripture, and the magisterium "are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others" (*Dei Verbum* 10). In other words, nothing is believed on the authority of tradition alone, Scripture alone, or the magisterium alone.

Vatican II dealt with Scripture most explicitly in the third chapter of its Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, especially in section 12. *Dei Verbum* 12, which lays down the principles for the Catholic interpretation of Scripture, is of great importance but has often been misunderstood. In 1988, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote:

I am personally persuaded that a careful reading of the *entire* text of *Dei Verbum* can yield the essential elements for a synthesis between historical method and theological hermeneutics, but this connection is not easily comprehensible. For this reason the post-conciliar reception has practically dismissed the theological parts of its statements as a concession to the past and has taken the text simply as an unqualified official confirmation of the historical-critical method. One may reckon such a one-sided reception of the Council in the profit column of the ledger insofar as the confessional differences between Catholic and Protestant exegesis virtually disappeared after the Council. The debit aspect of this event consists in the fact that by now the breach between exegesis and dogma in the Catholic realm has become total and that even for Catholics Scripture has become a word from the past, which every individual tries to transport into the present in his own way, without being able to put all too much trust in the raft on which he sets himself. Faith then sinks into a kind of philosophy of life that the individual seeks to distill from the Bible as best he can. Dogma, no longer able to rest on the ground of Scripture, loses its solidity. The Bible,

which has cut itself loose from dogma, has become a document of the past and itself belongs to the past.¹

Misleading Translations

The idea that the Council exalted historical-critical exegesis as the supreme norm of faith would be a serious misinterpretation but, as we shall see, this mistake is supported by some of the most popular translations of the text.

The first paragraph of *Dei Verbum* 12 makes a crucial distinction between two types of exegesis, which are discussed separately in the subsequent paragraphs. The interpreter, it states, must seek to discover what the sacred writers really meant and what it pleased God to manifest by their words. In Latin: "*attente investigare debet, quid hagiographi reapse significare intenderint et eorum verbis manifestare Deo placuerit.*"

Several of the English translations are misleading. The translation edited by Austin Flannery² reads: The interpreter . . . "should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, *that meaning* which God has thought well to manifest through the medium of their words." This translation drops out the word "et" ("and") in the Latin original and substitutes "that meaning," implying that God cannot manifest anything more than what the sacred writers had in mind.

The translation edited by Norman Tanner is even more misleading.³ It reads: The interpreter must "carefully investigate what meaning the biblical writers had in mind; *that will also be* what God chose to manifest by means of their words." The words "that will also be" have no counterpart in the Latin text.

The translation edited by Walter Abbott and Joseph Gallagher⁴ renders the Latin correctly: "The interpreter . . . should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended and what God chose to manifest through their words" (*Dei Verbum* 12). That sentence taken alone, however, does not settle the question whether or not the two meanings are identical.

The history of the text shows that an earlier draft of the initial sentence had mentioned only the meaning intended by the inspired writer and that the second clause was added in order to make provision for a genuinely theological exegesis.

1 Joseph Ratzinger, ed., *Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit*. Quaestiones Disputatae 117 (Freiburg: Herder, 1989), 20–21. This passage is lacking in the English version of Ratzinger's essay in Richard John Neuhaus, ed., *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

2 Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975).

3 Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1990).

4 Walter M. Abbott, Joseph Gallagher, eds., *The Documents of Vatican II With Notes and Comments by Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Authorities* (New York: Guild Press, 1966).

Both forms, or stages, of exegesis are necessary. The *Relatio* (official explanation), dated July 3, 1964, states that a merely rational hermeneutic is insufficient.⁵ The *Relationes* of July 3 and November 20, 1964 both state that the Council does not wish to settle the disputed question of the “*sensus plenior*.”⁶ But as we shall see, the teaching of *Dei Verbum* 12 is not easy to reconcile with the idea that Scripture has no meaning beyond what the sacred writers intended to communicate.

The opening sentence just discussed introduces the next two paragraphs—the second and third of *Dei Verbum* 12. Paragraph 2 deals with what the biblical writers intended, whereas paragraph 3, beginning with *Sed* (“but” or “moreover”) deals with further divinely intended meanings.⁷ The Council here builds on the distinction made in Pius XII’s biblical encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* between “the ‘literal meaning’ of the words intended and expressed by the sacred writer” and further spiritual meanings “intended and ordained by God.”⁸

Historical and Literary Study

Before going into the secondary meanings, we may briefly examine what the Council has to say about the first level. Literary and historical study, as understood in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and *Dei Verbum*, aims to disclose what the sacred writers wanted to say and did say. Presupposing sufficient study of the languages and historical circumstances, technical exegesis requires various kinds of criticism: *textual criticism* to determine the best reading, *source criticism* to determine literary dependency on earlier texts, *literary criticism* to ascertain the rhetorical and stylistic devices, *form criticism* to determine the literary form and the life-situation in which

5 *Acta synodalia sacrosancti concilii oecumenici Vaticani II* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1970–1980), Series III, vol. 3, 69–109, at 92. (Henceforth this work will be abbreviated AS III/3, or similarly.)

6 AS III/3, 93 and IV/1, 359.

7 Here again, the Abbott edition is superior to the Flannery and Tanner editions. Abbott, following the Latin text officially promulgated on November 18, 1965, divides §12 into three paragraphs. For some reason, the other two translations divide the second paragraph into two, thus obscuring the structure of the text. See the official version in AS IV/6, 579–609, at 602–3.

8 Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies, 16, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchar, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 115–139, at 126: “For what was said and done in the Old Testament was ordained and disposed by God with such consummate wisdom, that things in the past prefigured in a spiritual way those that were to come under the new dispensation of grace. Wherefore, the exegete, just as he must search out and expound the ‘literal’ meaning of the words intended and expressed by the sacred writer, so also must he do likewise for the spiritual sense, provided it is clearly intended by God. For God alone could have known this spiritual meaning and have revealed it to us. Now our divine Savior himself points out to us and teaches us this same sense in the holy Gospel. The apostles also, following the example of the Master, profess it in their spoken and written words.”

the text was composed, and *redaction criticism* to determine how the final author or redactor has recast the materials to suit his own pastoral and literary concerns.⁹

Dei Verbum 12, following *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, attaches great importance to literary criticism and form criticism. "Attention must be paid," it declares, "to the customary and characteristic styles of perceiving, speaking, and narrating that prevailed at the time." For an application of these principles one may consult *Dei Verbum* 19. Discussing the historicity of the Gospels, the Council here points out that the original reports of the "words and deeds of Jesus" underwent developments at the stage of oral transmission because the message was reformulated to address the varying situations of the churches. Then the sacred writers, composing the four Gospels, made further adaptations in view of their literary and theological perspectives.

To be correctly understood, *Dei Verbum* 19 should be read in light of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1964 instruction on the historical truth of the Gospels,¹⁰ which is referenced in a footnote. This instruction treated the three stages of the Gospel tradition more amply. While holding that all four Gospels are genuinely historical, the Council alerts us to the fact that they are not, and are not intended to be, verbatim reports or descriptions such as might come from an audiovisual tape. The Gospels are proclamatory documents, written from faith to faith. The Council's broad understanding of historicity thus obviates fundamentalist oversimplification.

In its treatment of the first level of meaning the Council gives great freedom to exegetes to follow the rules of their craft. It does not indicate that they are to treat the inspired text differently than if it were a profane text. But in its final paragraph, *Dei Verbum* 12 takes up what may be called theological or spiritual exegesis. To bring the meaning of the sacred text correctly to light, exegetes must, it states, take into account that the Bible is the inspired Word of God.¹¹

9 These and similar modes of criticism are explained in standard introductions, e.g., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Scripture, the Soul of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1994), 19–24. For applications of such methods to the New Testament see Raymond F. Collins, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1983). Both these authors, however, neglect the teaching of *Dei Verbum* 12 on the spiritual meanings of Scripture.

10 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels (April 21, 1964), in *The Scripture Documents*, 227–235.

11 Meanings that go beyond what the sacred writer might have grasped are sometimes called "more than literal," the term used by Raymond Brown in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. See Raymond E. Brown and Sandra M. Schneiders, "Hermeneutics," in *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy, 2 vols. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1146–65, at 1153. But Brown's terminology is not universally accepted because it seems to suggest that *Dei Verbum* is here departing from the meaning of the words (the literal meaning). Classical theology, represented by Thomas Aquinas, held that since God was the author of Holy Scripture, and since God understood much more by the words than the sacred writer, the literal words of Scripture could also convey more than one "spiritual" sense, although these additional spiritual senses were based upon and presupposed

Reading in the Spirit

This third paragraph of *Dei Verbum* 11 begins by remarking that since the biblical text is inspired, as previously stated in *Dei Verbum* 11, it must be read in the same Spirit by whom it was written. To enter into the meaning of the inspired text, one must rely on the Holy Spirit and on faith, which is a gift of the Spirit. The text does not at this point go into meanings that the Spirit may manifest to individual readers for their spiritual profit, a topic that will be touched upon in chapter 6 of *Dei Verbum*.¹² Many of the Church fathers, including Origen, Jerome, and Gregory the Great, taught that there must be a spiritual affinity between the interpreter and the text. Medieval monasticism built up a rich tradition of *lectio divina*, a practice that is still fruitfully pursued in our day under the name of spiritual exegesis. In chapter 3, however, the constitution is concerned with objective meanings, which are intended for all readers and for the Church at large. The concern is not with free charismatic exegesis, but with a theological style of interpretation that is, in its own way, scientific.

Dei Verbum 12 proposes three norms: the unity of Scripture, the tradition of the Church, and analogy of faith. Each of the three requires some comment. In speaking of the unity of Scripture, *Dei Verbum* treats the Bible in its entirety as a single book, inspired by God. It is God's Word inasmuch as God has made himself its author by way of inspiration. Because inspiration affects all the authors as a group, it is not a merely individual phenomenon. It guarantees that the Bible, taken as a whole, provides a solid foundation on which the Church may found her beliefs, her moral system, and her life of worship.¹³

In its treatment of inspiration and inerrancy, *Dei Verbum* 11 had manifested the Council's recognition of the human input of the sacred writers, with all their personal and cultural limitations. Vatican II speaks freely, not only of God as the "author" of Scripture, but also of the human authors as "true authors."¹⁴ In its treat-

the literal sense. "The author of Holy Scripture is God, in whose power it is to signify his meaning, not by words only (as man also can do) but also by things themselves. . . . Therefore the first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it." *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I, Q. 1, Art. 10 (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947). Some modern exegetes prefer to speak instead of a secondary literal meaning or a "fuller meaning" (*sensus plenior*). See Paul Synave and Pierre Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration* (New York: Desclee, 1961), 149–51.

- 12 Chapter 6 of *Dei Verbum* refers at several points to the spiritual profit that individual readers may derive from a prayerful reading of Holy Scripture.
- 13 To speak of the unity of Scripture is to invoke what has often been called canonical criticism—a method that has been fruitfully practiced and persuasively advocated by Brevard S. Childs of Yale University, among others. See Childs' *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).
- 14 "Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers should be regarded as asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that we must acknowledge the books of Scripture as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error the truth that God wished to be recorded in

ment of inerrancy in *Dei Verbum* 11, the Council refrained from stating explicitly that every declarative sentence in the Bible is true. It says instead that the books of Scripture (in the plural) teach firmly and without error the truth that God wanted to commit to them for the sake of our salvation.

The unity of the Bible, founded upon its divine inspiration, is of decisive importance for a Christian reading of the Old Testament. In chapter 4, the Council states that the books of the Old Testament “acquire and show forth their full meaning (*significationem completam*) in the New Testament . . . and in turn shed light on it and explain it” (*Dei Verbum* 16). The passage from prophecy to fulfillment and from type to antitype is a staple of classical Christian exegesis.¹⁵

With reference to the second norm for theological exegesis, our text declares: “The living tradition of the Church must be taken into account” (*Dei Verbum* 12). Earlier on, in *Dei Verbum* 8, the Council had stated that tradition is necessary for the full canon to be known and for the sacred writings to be more profoundly understood. Then in *Dei Verbum* 10, as we have seen, it affirmed that Scripture and tradition together constitute one sacred deposit. It is incorrect, therefore, to speak as though Scripture alone, examined with the tools of historical-critical scholarship, could adequately deliver the Word of God. *Dei Verbum* insists on the necessity of the “living tradition,” and of the magisterium as its locus, for discerning the divinely intended meaning. An example would be the Catholic practice of attributing the words of Jesus to Peter as addressed likewise to the successors of Peter, the popes (Matt. 16:18–19).

The third criterion is called in Latin “*analogia fidei*.” The Abbott edition translates this term rather felicitously as “the harmony that exists between elements of the faith.” We know *a priori* that God could not inspire a meaning that was contrary to the truth embodied in the dogmas of the Church. The dogmas serve as negative norms for excluding misinterpretations. More than this, they throw positive light on what the Holy Spirit was intimating in various biblical texts. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception, for example, permits a deeper understanding of the expression “full of grace” (translating the rare Greek word, *kécharitôménē*) applied to Mary by the angel at the Annunciation.

The regressive movement from the developed dogma to the biblical source is an approved method, sanctioned by Pius XII in *Humani Generis*.¹⁶ But in that encyclical, the Pope cautioned that theology becomes sterile if it neglects to renew

the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.” *Dei Verbum* 11. *Dei Verbum* thus seems to attribute inerrancy to the Bible as a whole, more than to individual passages, which must then be read in the context of the whole.

15 See Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (London: T & T Clark, 1994); Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 2000).

16 Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, Encyclical Letter on Certain False Opinions Threatening to Undermine the Foundations of Catholic Faith, 21, in *The Scripture Documents*, 140–146.

itself from the sacred sources of Scripture and tradition. Thus Alois Cardinal Grillmeier correctly remarks in his commentary on *Dei Verbum*:

There is here a reciprocal relationship: the living tradition of the Church helps us through its growing understanding of faith to a deeper understanding of Scripture. An ever renewed rereading of Scripture, however, must become the soul of theology and of the whole of tradition, so that everything can be led back to the unified fullness of the beginning, where everything was still “together.”¹⁷

The ‘Living Tradition’ and Theological Interpretation

The authors of *Dei Verbum* may not have wished to settle the disputed question of the *sensus plenior*, or the fuller literal meaning. But the paragraph on theological interpretation clearly favors some such sense. It would be hard to believe that the Old Testament authors could have grasped all the deeper signification of their words, as those would later be disclosed by the New Testament writers, Catholic tradition, and Catholic dogma—sources to which these inspired authors had no access.

The paragraph on theological interpretation concludes with the statement: “All that has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God” (*Dei Verbum*, 12). The magisterium does not enter only at the end of the process, but is involved at every stage. Speaking of the relation between exegetes and the magisterium, *Dei Verbum* 23 teaches that “Catholic exegetes . . . using appropriate means, should devote their energies, under the watchful care of the sacred magisterium, to an exploration and exposition of the divine writings.”

The magisterium is intimately involved in each of the three phases of theological exegesis. It plays an essential role in drawing up and defining the canon of Scripture, and thus in establishing the Bible as a unit. Tradition, as described in chapter 2, is inseparable from the magisterium, because it develops under the vigilance of the pastors and “through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth” (“*charisma veritatis certum*”—*Dei Verbum*, 8). The analogy of faith, finally, depends on the magisterium which alone has authority to proclaim articles of faith and dogmas.

Dei Verbum 10 states that only the magisterium, speaking in the name of Jesus Christ, can give an “authentic” interpretation. The Latin word “*authentica*” in

17 Alois Grillmeier, “The Divine Inspiration and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, 5 vols. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 3:199–246, at 245.

this context does not mean genuine but authoritative, that is to say, issued by persons having a mandate to teach in the name of the Lord. Authentic interpretations of this kind are rather rare, but they have considerable weight, especially when they are infallible.

Doctrinal definitions are normally based on a convergent use of many biblical texts, prayerfully read in the tradition of the worshipping Church under the light of the Holy Spirit. There are relatively few cases in which the Church has defined the meaning of particular texts, as the Council of Trent, for example, did in its decree on original sin and in its canons on the institution of various sacraments. Even in these cases, as Raymond Brown points out, the Church “was not settling a historical question about what was in the mind of the author when he wrote the text, but a religious question about the implications of Scripture for the life of the faithful.”¹⁸ The theological meaning is a true meaning of the text, and cannot be dismissed as “eisegesis,” as if the Church were reading something into the text that was not really there.

A difficulty against the teaching of *Dei Verbum* and earlier councils on the authority of the magisterium is that some interpretations of Scripture have, in the course of time, proven to be unsound. One might think in this connection of some arguments used to condemn Galileo’s heliocentrism, or certain aspects of the earlier decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

In the Galileo case, we can now see that the original papal commission failed to make necessary distinctions between the “salutary meaning” of Scripture and scientific assumptions derived by interpreters of the sacred writers.¹⁹ The Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in its Instruction, *Donum Veritatis* (“On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian”), conceded that some pastoral decisions (“prudential judgments”) by the magisterium “might not be free from all deficiencies.”²⁰ At his press conference presenting this instruction, then

18 Brown and Schneiders, “Hermeneutics,” 1163.

19 In various papers and addresses dealing with the Galileo case, Pope John Paul II pointed out the gradual process by which the Church learned to distinguish between matters of faith and the scientific systems of a given age. See, for instance, “A Papal Address on the Church and Science,” *Origins* 13 (June 2, 1983): 49–52.

20 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Veritatis*, Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian (May 24, 1990), 24, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (July 2, 1990), 1. The document, however, adds this cautionary note: “Bishops and their advisors have not always taken into immediate consideration every aspect or the entire complexity of a question. But it would be contrary to the truth, if, proceeding from some particular cases, one were to conclude that the Church’s magisterium can be habitually mistaken in its prudential judgments, or that it does not enjoy divine assistance in the integral exercise of its mission . . . [S]ome judgments of the magisterium could be justified at the time in which they were made, because while the pronouncements contained true assertions and others which were not sure, both types were inextricably connected. Only time has permitted discernment and, after deeper study, the attainment of true doctrinal progress.”

Congregation prefect Cardinal Ratzinger referred specifically to some decisions of the Biblical Commission:

As warning calls against rash and superficial accommodations, they remain perfectly legitimate: no less a personage than J. B. Metz, for example, has remarked that the anti-Modernist decisions of the Church performed the great service of saving her from foundering in the bourgeois-liberal world. Nevertheless, with respect to particular aspects of their content, they were superseded after having fulfilled their pastoral function in the situation of the time.²¹

Insofar as they dealt with technical, non-doctrinal matters, such as the dating and composition of particular books, the decrees were not truly infallible judgments, requiring interior assent.²² The vigilance of the Catholic magisterium at the time helped to protect the faithful against the conclusions of radical historical-critical exegesis. Tensions, however, still can and do arise, particularly in cases when technical exegetes and hierarchical officials go beyond their specific spheres of competence and responsibility.

The same is true of the relationship between critical exegesis and theological exegesis. Although tensions sometimes arise, the normal relationship, foreseen in *Dei Verbum*, is one of cooperation. Biblical scholars who are trained in historical-critical methods are perhaps best equipped to establish what the words meant to the inspired authors and their contemporaries. But canonical criticism, tradition-criticism, and dogmatic exegesis, all of which take account of the sacred character of the text, are needed to confirm, qualify, or enrich the findings of historical-critical scholarship so that the Church may be effectively guided by the Word of God.

The hierarchical magisterium, in its authentic pronouncements, does not speak as an independent authority but as an organ of the living tradition, informed by the inspired biblical texts. Its voice is not a foreign one, because it is by nature a servant of the Word of God. Thanks to the charisms given through episcopal ordination and appointment to office, the hierarchy can speak with deeper insight, but it will be best able to do so if it takes advantage of the prior work of biblical scholars, one of whose functions is to prepare for the judgment of the magisterium.

21 For the text of the Cardinal's press conference, see Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 101–107. For a fuller discussion of the matter see Ratzinger's address on the hundredth anniversary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "100 Years: The Magisterium and Exegesis," *Theology Digest* 51 (Spring 2004): 3–8.

22 In Ratzinger's words, they were "a signal for pastoral prudence, a sort of provisional policy. Their kernel remains valid, but the particulars determined by circumstances can stand in need of correction." *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 106.

As Pope Benedict XVI has stated, the work of scholars is a considerable help in understanding the living process in which the Scriptures developed,

Yet science alone cannot provide us with a definitive and binding interpretation. . . . A greater mandate is necessary for this, which cannot derive from human abilities alone. The voice of the living Church is essential for this, of the Church entrusted until the end of time to Peter and the college of the apostles.²³

Scripture scholars, theologians, and pastors should not go their separate ways, ignoring or fearing one another. Catholic exegetes should be skilled in theological as well as in philological interpretation. Dogmatic theologians and pastors should be familiar with the findings of technical exegesis.

When biblical scholars, theologians, and pastoral leaders work in harmony, the Church as a whole advances in its penetration of the Word of God. The mutual openness and cooperation of all who are concerned with the meaning of the Bible can help the entire people of God to be more responsive to the voice of the Holy Spirit and more faithful to its Lord.

23 Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass of Possession of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome (May 7, 2005), in *Origins* 35 (May 26, 2005): 26–28, at 28.