

Treasures New and Old: An Introduction to *Verbum Domini*

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THE POST-SYNODAL Apostolic Exhortation from the Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops that met on October 5–26, 2008 regarding the Word of God was well worth the wait. The exhortation is dated on the Memorial of St. Jerome, September 30, 2010, though it seems to have been released, at least in the English translation on which this introduction is based, on November 11, 2010.

Some wonder what new ideas this exhortation could contain. While there are no doctrinal innovations in this document, its scope—it explains with past precedents and writings why the word of God is at the heart of the Catholic Church and outlines how the word of God should function in the life and ministry of the Church—is definitely new.

It would be a mistake to judge the book by its cover, as it were, and assume that this exhortation is simply a reissue of the Vatican II document on Scripture, *Dei Verbum*. It is first of all a very clear call for all in the Catholic Church to deepen their relationship with Christ the Word of God by hearing, reading, and studying the word of God that we encounter in the Church's Scriptures.¹ In service of this call, the exhortation clarifies what *Dei Verbum* left undeveloped, explaining first of all in what sense Scripture is the word of God and then outlining how the Scripture is to be heard in the Church and in the world. It is fitting that

¹ In this introduction, "Word of God" begins with a capital letter when its sense includes the idea of Christ as God's Word. When the phrase is used primarily to designate Scripture, the phrase is not capitalized, i.e. "word of God." This seems to be the convention of the English translation of *Verbum Domini* as issued by the Vatican.

the title of this exhortation is the same as the lector's acclamation following the reading of Scripture during the Liturgy of the Word, since the exhortation is all about deepening and extending the faithful people's response to the Word of God. After surveying the exhortation, I will identify its main points of significance and suggest windows for study and discussion that the exhortation opens up for us.

Survey of *Verbum Domini*

Part One of the document, called *Verbum Dei*, deals with the theology of the Word (§§6–28). Its thematic scriptural basis is John 1:1, 14. Part Two of the document, called *Verbum in Ecclesia*, deals with how the Word of God can be more fully proclaimed and heard within the Church (§§50–89). Its thematic scriptural basis is John 1:12—“But to all who received him he gave power to become children of God.” Part Three of the document, called *Verbum Mundo*, deals with the amplification and reception of the Word of God in the world (§§90–120). Its thematic scriptural basis is John 1:18—“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart who has made him known.”

The brilliant decision to ground each part of the exhortation in texts from John's prologue on Christ the Word is a clear signal that at every level and in almost every section, this exhortation is deeply scriptural in orientation and reflection. There are many places in this document where Benedict XVI is exegeting the text of Scripture; in other places the text gives evidence of antecedent exegetical labor and meditation.

The first main section of Part One, *Verbum Dei*, is called “The God Who Speaks” (§§6–21). This section works out how the written word of God is related to Jesus the Word of God. In this way, the document displays a strong adherence to the teaching of Scripture and the Church, that the Word of God is first of all the Incarnate Son of God. It is this adherence along with the recognition that the Word of God is communicated within “the Church's living Tradition” that leads Benedict to surprise readers by insisting that Christianity is not a religion of the book (§7). Pope Benedict later offers an implication of this insistence (§38): “The word of God can never simply be equated with the letter of the text,” a truth that was forgotten by the second generation of Protestant Reformers.² Benedict also

² *Verbum Domini* §38; Augustine's description of the voice of John the Baptist as related to but always distinct from the actual Word of God resembles Benedict's point that the written letters on the pages of Scripture are never in themselves the word of God (*Serm.* 293.3). On the Protestant conflation of the written words with the actual word of God, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 37.

issues a call that the different senses of “Word of God” be theologically explored so that “the centrality of the person of Christ” might become more evident (§7). The section dealing with “private revelations” addresses the Protestant-inspired desire for individuals to take their own interpretation from Scripture. While such revelations “can introduce new emphases, give rise to new forms of piety, or deepen older ones,” as well as at times contain a prophetic word, the document helpfully distinguishes between the word of God in the Church and these “private revelations” (§14). A strong affirmation of the “pneumatological horizon” of the word of God (§16) signals what is a strong emphasis throughout the whole document, that the Scriptures must be read with a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s role both in their composition and in the hearing of the Scriptures today. Calls for all to recognize the essential roles that the Holy Spirit and faith play in the interpretation of Scripture are found throughout the first two parts of the exhortation (§§16, 25, 29, 29, 37, 38, 50–52, 66, 83). This emphasis on the Spirit allows Benedict to go on and note that the tradition in which the Church reads Scripture is a “living tradition,” a helpful corrective to past caricatures of the tradition as lifeless (§§17–18). It is not an accident that at this point there is a favorable reference to Origen, a character whose stock is surely raised by five positive references in the exhortation.³

The second main section of Part One, *Verbum Dei*, is called “Our Response to the God Who Speaks” (§§22–28). Faith is the quintessential response to the word of God, and since the Church is Christ’s body, faith is both a personal response and a church-based response to God’s word (§25). Sin is the human refusal to hear the word of God (§26). In §27 the Holy Father states: “The Synod Fathers declared that the basic aim of the Twelfth Assembly was ‘to renew the Church’s faith in the word of God.’” Since he indicates this “basic aim” in the section called “Our Response to the God Who Speaks,” it is evident that, like the prophetic books in our Old Testament Scripture, this exhortation is written primarily to evoke a behavioral change in those who hear God’s word, rather than to provide information or cognitive illumination. Pope Benedict signals this aim in the introduction to the exhortation as well: “With this Apostolic Exhortation I would like the work of the Synod to have a real effect on the life of the Church: on our personal relationship with the sacred Scriptures, on their interpretation in the liturgy and catechesis, and in scientific research, so that the Bible may not be simply a word from the past, but a living and timely word” (§5).

The third main section of Part One, *Verbum Dei*, is called “The Interpretation of Sacred Scripture in the Church (§§29–49). There are a

³ §12 n.34; §18 n. 64, §40 n. 134, §86, §93.

number of salient points made here, beginning with the Church as the primary context for the interpretation of Scripture (§§29–30) and the identification of the study of Scripture as “the soul of theology” (§31). While strongly affirming the historical critical method in a way that analogously relates it to the incarnation (§32), the pope directly addresses Catholic exegetes’ task when he states, “Their common task is not finished when they have simply determined sources, defined forms or explained literary procedures. They arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God’s word for today” (§33). This statement is typical of the exhortation as a whole: while historical critical approaches are affirmed, the Holy Father consistently calls all who are involved in the reading and study of Scripture to see that the agenda of historical critical and other scientific approaches is not the final goal of the exegesis of the Church’s Scripture.⁴ After recognizing “clear inconsistencies” that are evident when books of the Bible are compared (§39), Benedict offers a very positive affirmation of the typological reading of Scripture (§41) and he gives examples in sections that follow (§§50, 54).⁵ The section closes with a perspective on biblical interpretation that those in the academy seldom consider: “A notion of scholarly research that would consider itself neutral with regard to Scripture should not be encouraged” (§47). We must listen to and learn from the saints who sought to conform their lives very closely to Scripture (§48), and holiness in the Church constitutes an interpretation of Scripture that cannot be overlooked (§49).

Part Two of the exhortation, *Verbum in Ecclesia*, begins with a section called “The Word of God and the Church” (§§50–51). This introductory section establishes that it is the Church that is the primary recipient of God’s Word, rather than the individual believer or scholar (§50) and that, since Christ is always present within the Church, those who fully receive the gospel of Christ are those who participate in the life of the Church. The second section of this part of the exhortation is called “The Liturgy, Privileged Setting for the Word of God” (§§52–71). As we would expect from the author of a book on the liturgy, this section examines how

⁴ See also Joseph Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁵ Those involved in the production and use of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible have strong support from this exhortation to continue in the exegetical approaches that they employ. The typological exegesis employed in the Genesis volume of this series seems to me to exemplify the strengths of the typological approach recommended by Benedict XVI. See R. R. Reno, *Genesis: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010).

Scripture is related to specific aspects of the liturgy, including the Eucharist (§§54–55), the lectionary (§57), the homily (§§59–60), and the liturgy of the hours (§62).⁶ The section closes with “suggestions and proposals for promoting fuller participation in the liturgy” (§64). These proposals include valuing the silence that follows the reading of Scripture; here as in other places of the document Mary is cited as a positive example of one who received the word (§66). The reading of the Gospel during the Mass is to be solemn, marked with song or chant to show the significance of what is read (§67). The book that contains the word of God is to be given a visible place of honor in the local church, but without usurping the central place that the tabernacle holding the Blessed Sacrament must continue to occupy (§68). Proclamations of the word in song, including Gregorian chant, are good (§70). Efforts must be made to allow the hearing impaired to hear the word of God in the Mass (§71).

The third section of Part Two of the exhortation is called “The Word of God in the Life of the Church” (§§72–89). This section begins with a statement that confirms that the primary aim of this exhortation is to bring the Church’s faithful to a more Scripture-centered existence and illustrates the historic significance of this exhortation as a challenge to the claims of Protestant churches that they are more biblical than the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Benedict writes: “With the Synod Fathers I express my heartfelt hope for the flowering of ‘a new season of greater love for sacred Scripture on the part of every member of the People of God, so that their prayerful and faith-filled reading of the Bible will, with time, deepen their personal relationship with Jesus’” (§72 quoting from *Propositio* 9 of the Synod). It is in this section that the pope uses the phrase “biblical apostolate,” which he defines as an initiative that makes sure that all work in local churches and Christian organizations is directly focused on providing “a personal encounter with Christ, who gives himself to us in his word” (§73, see also §75). Bishops, priests, deacons, candidates in formation, consecrated people—contemplatives in the cloister are thanked here (§83)—and faithful laypeople are all called to make sure that their lives are filled with God’s word in order to be holy (§§78–84). The seminal relationship between the word of God and the institutions of marriage and family is underscored, with a concluding paragraph emphasizing the “indispensable role played by women in the family, education, catechesis and the communication of values” (§85 drawing on John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*). *Lectio divina* is advocated as an especially effective vehicle for Scripture-based growth in spirituality.

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000).

After quoting St. Augustine,⁷ the Holy Father writes: “Origen, one of the great masters of this way of reading the Bible, maintains that understanding Scripture demands, even more than study, closeness to Christ and prayer. Origen was convinced, in fact, that the best way to know God is through love, and that there can be no authentic *scientia Christi* apart from growth in his love.”⁸ The section on *lectio divina* ends with a corrective emphasis on reading Scripture not as an individual but within the Church in the context of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist (§86). Mary is the primary example of one who contemplates and accepts the word of God (§87). The Holy Rosary, the *Angelus*, and the *Akathist* and *Paraklesis* prayers from Eastern Christianity are all cited as exemplary ways of uniting our lives with the incarnate Word whose story is told in the Scriptures (§88). Thus there is a strong affirmation of Marian prayer as a means of bringing our prayer life into conformity with Scripture. A final unit of this section, entitled “The word of God and the Holy Land,” notes how the Synod Fathers called the Holy Land a “the Fifth Gospel” and affirms how significant it is that Christian communities endure through hardships in this land.⁹

Part Three of the exhortation, *Verbum Mundo*, begins with a section called “The Church’s Mission: To Proclaim the Word of God to the World” (§§90–98). The proclamation of God’s word is enjoined on all the baptized (§94), identified as a necessity (§95), and linked to the new evangelization initiated by John Paul II (§96). The second section of Part Three is called “The Word of God and Commitment in the World” (§§99–108). It is in this section that the prophetic edge of Part Three is especially evident. For example, in the unit specifically focused on “the proclamation of the word of God and migrants,” the Holy Father follows the recommendation of the Synod: “Taking into account the complexity of the phenomenon [of migration], a mobilization of all dioceses involved is essential, so that the movements of migration will also be seen as an opportunity to discover new forms of presence and proclamation. It is also necessary that they ensure, to the extent possible, that these our brothers and sisters receive adequate welcome and attention.”¹⁰ After a moving section on “the proclamation of the word of God and the suffer-

⁷ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 85,7.

⁸ *Verbum Domini* §86. There follows a long quotation from Origen, *Epistola ad Gregorium* 3.

⁹ *Verbum Domini* §89, quoting from *Propositio* 51 of the Synod. §89 seems to anticipate the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops held on October 10–24, 2010.

¹⁰ *Verbum Domini* §105, citing *Propositio* 38 of the Synod.

ing” (§106), the Holy Father goes on to consider “the proclamation of the word of God and the poor” (§107). He quotes the Synod Fathers affirming that “the poor are the first ones entitled to hear the proclamation of the Gospel; they need not only bread, but also words of life.”¹¹ Section 107 in the exhortation also includes the ideas of poverty as virtue and poverty as indigence. While stating that “the Church cannot let the poor down,” Benedict advocates a balance “between the poverty which is *to be chosen* and the poverty which is *to be combated*” (his emphasis).

The third section of Part Three is called “The Word of God and Culture” (§§109–16). This section seems to flow out of the burden that Benedict XVI has taken up for renewing Western civilization.¹² “Down the centuries the word of God has inspired different cultures, giving rise to fundamental moral values, outstanding expressions of art and exemplary life-styles. Hence, in looking to a renewed encounter between the Bible and culture, I wish to reassure all those who are part of the world of culture that they have nothing to fear from openness to God’s word, which never destroys true culture, but rather is a constant stimulus to seek ever more appropriate, meaningful and humane forms of expression” (§109). A knowledge of the Bible, even for those in secular contexts, is encouraged: “a sense of the Bible as a great code for cultures needs to be fully recovered” (§110).¹³ The Scriptures must be taught in schools and universities (§111), animate artistic expression (§112), be presented through media like the internet while always remaining part of actual, personal contact (§113), and must be translated into languages still lacking the Scriptures in their own tongue (§115). While the Bible can speak to every culture and thus can facilitate the “inculturation of the Gospel” (§114), the word of God transcends all cultural boundaries (§116).

The fourth section of Part Three is called “The Word of God and Inter-religious Dialogue” (§§117–20). This section first affirms that the Scriptures teach that God loves all people and desires all to become one family.¹⁴

¹¹ *Verbum Domini* §107, quoting *Propositio* 11 of the Synod.

¹² See, though it is not cited in the exhortation, Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006). See also Joseph Ratzinger and Peter Seewald, *Salt of the Earth: Christianity and the Catholic Church at the End of the Millennium*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997); George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics without God* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Weigel, “Britain Can Benefit from Benedict,” *Standpoint* (September 2010).

¹³ Cf. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

¹⁴ *Verbum Domini* §117, citing Gn 9:13–14, 16; Is 2:2–4; 42:6; 66:18–21; Jer 4:2; Ps 47.

Besides the recognition that Islam “includes countless biblical figures, symbols and themes” (§118) and the assertion that the “religious books” of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism share some of the values of Christianity (§119), this section does not offer practical suggestions for how the Christian Scriptures are to be used in interreligious dialogue.

The conclusion returns to the behavioral goal of this exhortation: “We must never forget that all authentic and living Christian spirituality is based on *the word of God proclaimed, accepted, celebrated and meditated upon in the Church*. This deepening relationship with the divine word will take place with even greater enthusiasm if we are conscious that, in Scripture and the Church’s living Tradition, we stand before God’s definitive word on the cosmos and on history” (§121, emphasis original). To hear the word of God anew is linked to the new evangelization (§122) and this hearing brings joy (§123). The connection between hearing God’s word and joy is exemplified by Mary (§124; Lk 1:45; 8:21; 11:28). And in an *inclusio* that returns to the primary sense of the Word of God emphasized in this exhortation’s beginning, the Holy Father concludes with a blessing: “May every day of our lives thus be shaped by a renewed encounter with Christ, the Word of the Father made flesh: he stands at the beginning and the end, and ‘in him all things hold together.’”¹⁵

Main Points of Significance

1. The exhortation signals how we should exegete the Scriptures. This document models Benedict’s appreciation of the Church Fathers’ exegesis that is open to the spiritual sense (§37) and a positive, though defined role for “biblical science” (§§19; 32). The document as a whole evokes a spiritual reading of Scripture that is open to the influence of the Holy Spirit and not more dependence on the historical critical method and other scientific approaches. “As the reader matures in the life of the Spirit, so there grows also his or her capacity to understand the realities of which the Bible speaks.”¹⁶

The historical moment of this exhortation differs from the time of Pius XII’s writing of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Pope Pius was rightfully concerned that the Church’s scholars should avail themselves of advances in textual and literary criticism and so he led them to focus on the literal sense of the text in its first *Sitz im Leben*.¹⁷ By contrast, this exhortation by Benedict XVI is concerned that the Scriptures

¹⁵ §124, quoting Col 1:17.

¹⁶ *Verbum Domini* §30, quoting Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (15 April 1993), II, A, 2.

¹⁷ Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* §§13–15, 20.

never be read simply “as an object of historical curiosity,” but rather always be read as a product of the Holy Spirit through which readers hear our Lord speak (§19). Whereas Pius XII encouraged the Church’s Scripture scholars to make use of the riches of Egypt in their studies of the sacred text, Benedict XVI is now inviting scholars to bring their riches out of Egypt and into the promised land of the Church: “I urge that the study of the word of God, both handed down and written, be constantly carried out in a profoundly ecclesial spirit, and that academic formation take due account of the pertinent interventions of the magisterium, which ‘is not superior to the word of God, but is rather its servant.’”¹⁸

2. The pope is going on record that the Scriptures are at “the very *heart* of the Christian life” (§3, his emphasis). The message of this exhortation is that Scripture study must be regarded as “the soul of theology” (§31), and this means that such study must be central in the formation of priests (§47). Seminarians must be taught to study Scripture in a way that simultaneously moves them to pray the Scriptures, for the study of Scripture is necessarily linked to prayer (§82). Since the Scriptures are to figure significantly in homilies (§59), the “biblical apostolate” that this exhortation enjoins on the Church (§§73, 75) will surely affect how priests and religious are formed for ministry.
3. This is a rather Jewish-friendly document. In the introduction we learn that a rabbi gave an invited witness regarding the Scriptures for the first time at any Church synod (§4). The openness to the Jews’ prior possession of part of the Church’s Scriptures is signaled by the term “Hebrew Scriptures,” first occurring in §4 and then developed again in §40. Reference is made in §115 to the Targumim and the Septuagint. The admission that there is an aspect of “discontinuity” in the relationship (alongside the aspects of “continuity” and “fulfilment and transcendence”) of the New Testament to the Old Testament (§40) is significant and can only help in the ongoing dialogue with Jews, which the exhortation explicitly encourages (§43).
4. While addressed to the faithful within the Catholic Church, this exhortation functions as a tactical challenge to Protestants who assert that the Catholic Church does not ground itself in the Scriptures. Indeed, this document should help Catholics move from being defensive about the Church’s infallible magisterium (§§18, 32, 33, 45)

¹⁸ *Verbum Domini* §47, quoted material on the magisterium from the Vatican II document *Dei Verbum* §10.

to challenge other forms of Christianity that vest the individual interpreter or congregation with a license of infallibility in the interpretation of Scripture.

Windows for Discussion and Study

1. As the Holy Father indicates early in the exhortation, there is a need for theologians to study how the different senses of “the Word of God” are related, so that God’s plan might be seen as a unified whole and so that Christ’s central role in this plan may be highlighted (§7; see also §18).
2. “The relationship between Mariology and the theology of the word” is also identified as a locus for further study (§27). The descriptions of Mary throughout the exhortation surely provide an agenda that can be usefully followed as this relationship is explored (§§12, 15, 27, 28, 66, 79, 83, 87, 88, 124).
3. The ways in which the idea of “the word of God” might be used in interreligious dialogue, including possible uses of Scripture in such dialogue, could be further considered as a development of some of the final thoughts of this exhortation (§§117–20).
4. An extended examination of the scriptural exegesis that is the happy and heart-warming engine of much of this exhortation would be beneficial. Test cases in the integration of typological exegesis with more modern, scientific approaches would also prove useful (§§41, 50, 54).
5. A discussion of this exhortation among Catholic and non-Catholic Christians (such as Orthodox, Lutheran, or evangelical Protestant) known to value the word of God would prove beneficial in highlighting the distinct contributions of this exhortation.

This exhortation represents a blessed and fruitful opportunity for all Christians. May all who take and read it encounter more fully the word of God and the Word it communicates. “Every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old” (Mt 13:52). **N V**