

How To Renew the Theology of Biblical Inspiration?

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ONLY TRIUMPHALISTS and naive enthusiasts consider the history of theology as a linear development sloping upward through the centuries from insight to insight, from good to better. In truth, the human condition makes it inevitable that while we focus on one aspect of the truth, we lose sight of another. The theological renewal, which first prompted the major initiatives of the Second Vatican Council and afterward was animated by the Council, greatly transformed and reshaped theological thinking, produced a great many achievements, but also caused casualties and losses. Recent developments in the theology of biblical inspiration, a topic explicitly dealt with by the Council in its dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*, may be a good example for this mixed record of gains and losses, causing the present state of biblical exegesis, which, if it wants to serve the needs of the Church, is in serious need of a new approach and a major shift in attitudes and practices among Catholic theologians and exegetes.

I. The State of Research Before the Council

It is no exaggeration to say that right before the Council, the question of biblical inspiration was perceived by both dogmatic and biblical theologians as a question of great importance and full of challenge. To demonstrate this point it may suffice to recall the first volume of the highly esteemed German series *Questiones disputatae* published by Herder & Herder, which was dedicated to the most important issues of a widening frontier and opening horizon and engaged, among the authors, the most

prominent figures of German Catholic theology. This first volume was written by Karl Rahner with the title *Über die Schriftinspiration*.¹

Indeed, between the councils, Vatican I and II, theological issues of inspiration, canon, and hermeneutics received much attention. There was in the Church an ongoing tension over the status of critical biblical scholarship in Catholic theology, causing a sense of urgency to define “biblical inerrancy” with more clarity and precision. Catholic exegetes felt that they were strapped in a straightjacket of various demands and postulates, some implausible and others outright anachronistic, which all appeared to be derivative of concerns regarding inspiration and inerrancy. At their appearance, both encyclicals, *Providentissimus* by Leo XIII and *Divino Afflante* by Pius XII, were applauded, especially in the theological textbooks published immediately before Vatican II, as roadposts showing the way in which one may correct and clarify the Catholic dogma of biblical inspiration and its implications. However, in his book, Rahner clearly stated a more radical position as he demanded that the inspired character of the Bible be simply “thought through anew.” He also stated that this topic cannot be dealt with by biblical specialists but must be handled in the context of dogmatic theology. He probably had in mind a new branch of dogmatic theology, which was beginning to replace the more traditional discipline of “Apologetics,” with the modern name of “Fundamental Theology,” it has come to include within its newly defined scope the issues of biblical inspiration and canonicity. At the time, Karl Rahner himself was teaching “Fundamental Theology” at the University of Innsbruck. Elsewhere, in more traditional curricula, many seminaries and universities continued to offer a course named “General Introduction to Sacred Scripture” in which the matters of inspiration, inerrancy, canon, and biblical hermeneutics (methodology of scriptural interpretation) were taught by biblical specialists and not systematic theologians, a fact that makes Rahner’s concern more understandable. But everywhere, in one form or another, a course on inspiration was compulsory for every candidate for the priesthood.

In the decades between the two Vatican councils, mainly by the merit of the two papal encyclicals named above, a large number of issues were

¹ Rahner, Karl, *Über die Schriftinspiration*, Volume I, *Questiones disputatae* (Freiburg: Herder & Herder, 1957). The work was first published in the review *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 78 (1956): 137–68. However, in the preface of this rather small book, Rahner already warns the reader that “today” the average Catholic would not consider the question of biblical inspiration as an important one and that even for exegetes who follow Catholic teaching the concept of inspiration is treated as of no consequence unless one has to deal with it in the context of its implication, that is, the negatively stated norm of inerrancy, i.e., the absence of error in all biblical texts.

handled within the limits of orthodoxy and ceased causing major trouble for Catholics in their use of historical criticism in biblical studies. Especially after the publication of *Divino Afflante* (1943), Catholic biblicists finally abstained from polemics about such questions as the literal interpretation of the six days of creation or the historicity of Jonah's spending three days in the belly of a whale. The concept of "literary genres" and of the principle of "divine condescendence" stated in the encyclical successfully dissuaded Catholic intellectuals from dealing with the first eleven chapters of Genesis as "history" in the modern sense of the term or from raising issues with evolution by exegetical tools. All these developments produced a certain sense of progress and optimism, even if the demands of critical scholarship had not been met even halfway.

With the resurgence of neo-scholastic theology and its aim of recasting all post-Tridentine theology into a Thomistic system, significant efforts were made to reformulate the question of biblical inspiration in terms of the *Summa theologiae*, focusing on questions 171–174 in part I, and using St. Thomas's teaching about prophecy and his concept of "instrumental causality" as a basic philosophical tool for explaining the relationship between the two concurrent (divine and human) authorships of the biblical texts.

A third set of impulses began its influence in these decades, although at a relatively late time and in an oblique manner, from the patristic renewal as it turned its attention to the Church Fathers' use of the Bible. It became clear that patristic authors and their medieval heirs studied Scripture in a "precritical" framework, but the experts, especially the biblicists, appeared divided in their evaluation of biblical exegesis.² Unfortunately, the patristic renewal itself never reached the point of reconstructing and evaluating the Church Fathers' theology of inspiration so that, ultimately, for a modern discussion of that issue, only moderate contributions were made.

Thus, on the eve of the Council, the persons and committees preparing the conciliar *schemas* were facing a rather complex situation. First, there existed an official school-book theology of inspiration and inerrancy exemplified by the publications of two Roman theologians, both Jesuits, Fr. S. Tromp and Fr. A. Bea, both famous collaborators of Pius XII, the latter being known as the ghost writer of *Divino afflante*. Second, there was a Thomistic reconstruction of the theology of inspiration, which, in the

² So, for example, early on a remarkable book by C. Charlier (*Lecture chrétienne de la Bible*) championed the model of patristic exegesis. Also, various publications by Jean Daniélou gave concrete examples for an enlightened and modern application of the Church Fathers' exegesis. But, in general, biblical scholars expressed reservations about the contribution of patristic studies to contemporary biblical studies.

footsteps of M.-J. Lagrange, renewed efforts to provide a relevant and useful Thomistic foundation for Catholic exegesis. This trend was best represented by two books: a volume in a new French commentary on the *Summa* by two Dominicans, Fr. Synave and Fr. Benoit, and a series of articles by the same Fr. Benoit, newly appointed head of the *École Biblique* in Jerusalem. A third tendency appeared in a scattered set of publications. Although their authors and the trend they set were not widely known among biblical specialists, they came to be listed with the most influential thinkers of the Council and were recognized as the greatest theological minds of the preconciliar years. We mention most importantly the following: Henri de Lubac with his book *Histoire et Esprit*, a penetrating study of Origen's exegetical work; Hans Urs von Balthasar with a superior commentary on St. Thomas's thought about prophecy and inspiration in the twenty-third volume of the *Deutsche Thomas Ausgabe*; and Yves Congar with his *La tradition et les traditions*, which seems at first glance to be a hasty anthology of patristic texts, but is in fact a remarkable dossier of ancient texts about the relationship of Scripture and tradition.³ Just before the Council opened, De Lubac's monumental work on medieval exegesis began to be published in consecutive volumes, but at that time—and possibly up to the present day—it seems that it has not been read by more than a handful of specialists. Finally, the most pertinent work of the time on biblical inspiration *La palabra inspirada* by Fr. Alonso-Schökel, SJ, was published just a bit too late to get attention at the Council. Among other reasons, the author, a brilliant exegete and literary critic, was still too young to be known, and writing in his native Spanish, he did not get the attention he deserved.

II. The Doctrine of Inspiration at the Council

A. Content and Focus: What the Document Contains

The rather colorful and complicated history of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* has been well presented shortly after the Council.⁴ Understandably, the point of view from which the story was narrated is by now rather obsolete: The story is told in the perspective of a certain postconciliar triumphalism. The story speaks of the “theological renewal” that gave us the Council while fighting the reactionary elements of the

³ All three eventually became cardinals, one might say “honoris causa,” in the post-conciliar years.

⁴ J. Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Origin and Background” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. H. Vorgrimler (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 155–69.

Curia, personified in Cardinal Ottaviani, and managed to overcome a long list of obstacles, even intrigues, finally giving the Church the platform for a new theology of revelation and inspiration. The narrator, Joseph Ratzinger, later Cardinal and successor to Cardinal Ottaviani, and now Pope Benedict XVI, adopts this point of view—but with a grain of salt. Right after the Council, he already saw that one cannot tell the story of *Dei Verbum* with an unreserved sense of happy ending. He admits that in this document “no mature conclusion had been reached.” And further he states: “Even now, after the council, it is not possible to say that the question about the relation of critical [exegesis] and Church exegesis, historical research and dogmatic tradition has been settled.”⁵ In other words, soon after the Council (and possibly even during the Council’s last year), several of the participants have seen well that, under more than one aspect, the document failed to satisfy the expectations. In the name of fairness, one must approach *Dei Verbum* with a full realization that the Council’s theologians offered what was available, but were simply unprepared for a thorough rethinking—as Karl Rahner demanded—of the theology of inspirations according to the same standards and criteria with which they were able to treat ecclesiology or liturgy or ecumenism. The critical remarks that follow are made with the proverbial acuity of hindsight and should not be interpreted as a sign for lack of appreciation for what the document accomplished or a sign of pretension that a different group of people or another “majority” leading the Commission could have accomplished a significantly better job.

B. The Doctrine of Inspiration in Dei Verbum

Biblical inspiration is treated in chapter III. At first, it appears that the document says little or nothing beyond what has been stated by the Magisterium in previous documents at the Council of Trent, at Vatican I, and in the encyclicals *Providentissimus* and *Divino Afflante*. Nonetheless an important change appears in *Dei Verbum* on account of a new context and outlook coming from the changes that the document underwent during the vicissitudes of its *seven* redactions (texts A through G).⁶ Originally the Council’s Document was intended to treat “the two sources of revelation.” It was supposed to define the relationship of Scripture and tradition in favor a traditionalist interpretation of Trent. The plan was that the “sources of revelation,” Scripture and tradition, would be presented as *two* juxtaposed and adequately distinguishable entities. However, in a rather early

⁵ Ibid., 158.

⁶ For an outline of each version of the document A–G, see Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution,” 165–66.

phase, right at the first session, the preparatory commission's *schema*, composed by Fr. S. Tromp and supported by Cardinal Ottaviani, drew open criticism and led to a major showdown between the conservative and progressive wings. Only a personal intervention by Pope John XXIII helped to avoid open confrontation. This act by the pope was generally interpreted as a defeat for the conservatives since, by the pope's order, the whole project was taken off the agenda.⁷ Yet, after a pause of more than a year, again by the order of the pope, this time Paul VI, work on the topic was resumed: A new "subcommission" was formed with the task of writing a Dogmatic Constitution on the nature and use of the Bible in the Church. The document received the new title *De Revelatione*, which gave the opportunity to insert the topic of scriptural inspiration, inerrancy, and interpretation into the larger topic of revelation, a topic for which there was much more preparedness and expertise among progressive theologians. While in the *Schultheologie* (a derogatory term often used by Rahner to refer to the *status quo* of the theological textbooks) constant efforts were made to distinguish—even to isolate—revelation and inspiration, the new schema, by its very structure, made it clear that biblical inspiration, had to be seen as subservient to divine revelation, and in fact as a tool used by God to constitute written records in service of his self-disclosure.

Now, in the spirit of a renewed theology of revelation, inspiration became referenced not to a set of propositional truths or doctrinal affirmations but to the "Economy of Salvation," a term just recently recovered from the patristic heritage and popularized among young dogmatists and biblical theologians. In fact, with some variation of terminology, this concept, named also as "sacred history" or "salvation history," appeared as a key term for the various overviews of biblical theology in the fifties and sixties.

Although improved by this renewed context of revelation, the document's new contribution to the theology of inspiration appears timid and meager.⁸ The text briefly speaks about God as "author of the Scriptures."

⁷ The schema was presented to the Council on November 14, 1962, by Msgr. Garofalo and Cardinal Ottaviani. It drew a storm of criticism. To save the schema, on November 20, an unfortunate and confusing voting took place, asking whether or not to interrupt the discussion. As Ratzinger writes, "whoever was against the scheme now had to vote 'yes' and who was for it 'no'" (161). With this formulation of the question, the legal status of the schema was reversed. The positive votes (favoring the interruption of the discussion) needed a two-thirds majority, which they did not obtain, although they were in majority. The Council reached the point where the agenda was dictated by a minority. It was at this point that, on November 21, the pope removed the schema from the agenda. Cf. Ratzinger, "Dogmatic Constitution," 160–61.

⁸ The treatment of inspiration is rather brief in ch. III, nos. 11–13.

This concept has long been regarded as the one with which textbooks were to begin their treatment of inspiration.⁹ It has also appeared as the first topic addressed by Karl Rahner's challenge to renew "school theology." But the focal issue of Rahner's book on inspiration, the distinction between "author" and "originator" (in German *Verfasser* and *Urheber*), is not even mentioned in the text, and so the question of God's transcendental authorship—and thus the fact that human and divine roles in inspiration can both be called "authorship" only in an analogous sense—receives no attention. Instead, the document concentrates on the question of how to conceive a linkage between the two authors, one human, the other divine. God exercises his "authorship" as he "puts together (*confecit*)" the inspired books through selecting human beings through whom and in whom he acts (*Ipso in illis et per illos agente*). In other words, from the concept "Deus auctor scripturarum" the document jumps to a concept of *double authorship*, divine and human, which it then promptly applies to all scriptural texts. Both the conservatives and the progressives of the council readily agreed to this conceptual outline and the language employed, because, apparently, neither side was able to offer any better approach. In fact, the coordination and subordination of the "two authors" has been for a long time the central issue for "the Roman textbook theology," at both the *Gregoriana*, and the *Angelicum*. For the so-called "speculative" or Thomistic thought promoting biblical renewal (in the footsteps of Lagrange and under the leadership of a new exegete, the French Dominican Pierre Benoit) saw the "solution" to explain the compatibility of such double causality in using Thomism. On the other hand, the main preoccupation of the progressives, even of Rahner's book, was the request of new thinking about *this* same issue. Besides, many progressive theologians saw "a Christological potential" in such an approach. They hoped by such an approach to bring back the doctrine of biblical inspiration from rarefied speculations on "instrumental causality" to direct linkage with the new Christocentric synthesis of an "economy of salvation." Indeed, it seemed that if Scripture was recognized as "fully human and fully divine," then one could find, following patristic models, primarily those of St. Irenaeus and Origen, the right balance between biblical "monophysitism and Nestorianism," a popular demand in

⁹ Unfortunately, the first book to examine the concept "Deus auctor scripturarum" in the tradition in a modern philological approach appeared too late for the Council to consider: L. Alonso-Schökel, *The Inspired Word* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967). The original work (*La palabra inspirada* [Barcelona: Herder, 1966]) has been further completed, expanded, and partially rewritten by Alonso-Schökel's congenial American student, then a young Trappist, Fr. Francis Martin, but neither he nor his professor had a chance to influence the conciliar document.

the ranks of the “biblical movement.” This Christological “analogy” to biblical inspiration offered itself as the best approach for defending the legitimacy of looking for theological meaning in every part of the Bible, while, at the same time, validating the application of the historical-critical method to these ancient texts. On this basis one hoped to open the Bible to full use in theology and liturgy as God’s word of self-disclosure, as well as to thorough “scientific” investigation by literary and historical criticism as the self-expression of a human author, fully inserted in the flow of history and into psychological processes which govern human authorship.

Certainly, the conciliar text remained on secure ground and in potential continuity with many patristic and medieval sources as well as in obedience to the pronouncements of the Magisterium, as it continued to emphasize that the human authors engaged in writing biblical texts were in full possession of their human faculties and abilities (*facultatibus et viribus utentes*). At the Council there was little or no need to insist in order to exclude either an “ecstatic” or “dictational” concept of inspiration. Actually, the Council Fathers’ concern was in the opposite direction. They were anxious to emphasize that in the case of biblical inspiration not so much was the human author elevated above his limits but rather God’s condescension to our human level took new dimensions: God speaks through human beings and in a human way (*per hominem et more hominum*). Later in the document, the idea of divine condescension receives special importance with regard to the Old Testament. There, in particular, God accommodates his speech to our nature (*adtemperatione usus sit nostrae naturae*) and employs a kind of “divine pedagogy.” As a result, Scriptures contain imperfections and time-bound elements (*imperfecta et temporaria*). But in the immediate context of the “double authorship,” the conciliar text makes a quick transition to the special concerns of modern exegesis. Since God speaks in human terms and uses human authors, the interpreter must investigate the human author’s precise intention, for only by understanding exactly what the “sacred writers” (*hagiographi*) had in mind (*reapse significare intenderint*) can we identify what God intended to manifest through their words. Obviously, here the discourse imperceptibly changes the topic from inspiration to that of interpretation. What follows in the document sounds like an innocuous repetition of the basic thesis of the encyclical *Divino Afflante*: The exegetes must study, first and foremost, the “literary genre” of a book or writing. Moreover, before deciding about the meaning of a text, he must identify how, in his self-expression, the human author responded to the specific circumstances (*in determinatis adjunctis*) and conditions of his own time (*pro sui temporis et suae culturae conditione*) while he employed the literary genres available at his time in history.

However, the link between Scripture's full humanity and this "need" by the exegete to identify the author's intention and conscious inner disposition (for otherwise he cannot obtain insights into the divinely intended meaning of a biblical text) appears to be too tightly—too simplistically—conceived. The statement's logic goes far beyond only justifying historico-critical exegesis, but rather imposes it as a necessary condition for access to the authentic meaning of the text. The conciliar text fails to deal with the question of the transcendence of the divine author. One does not see how to avoid a false conclusion that in the process of divine inspiration, the human being's consciousness sets limits to the divine meaning. Whatever the author does not intend consciously cannot be truly in any form or shape a part of the authentic meaning of the text. Moreover one remains baffled by such a narrow "must" imposed on the reader to reconstruct the human author's intention in its original setting. Such a reconstruction is often not even possible or is of no central concern for the divinely intended meaning of a text. For the divine author's intention does not appear only in the context of a biblical book's historical setting, but also in its canonical context. In fact, there is much content in the biblical text of which the human author, according to his historically limited perspective, remains partially or fully unaware.

But at this point the document moves on, fortunately, in another direction emphasizing that the Bible contains a variety of literary forms, and specifically mentions the historical, the prophetic, and the poetic character of the various texts. This was important for the new thinking about revelation: Biblical texts do not contain only propositional truths, but use all the various resources of their culture as they provide narrative, lyric, legislative, and other texts, all belonging to a general vision of "salvation economy."

Obviously, it is here that one can arrive at two conclusions. On the one hand, by paying due attention to the human author, the document invites the interpreter to embrace the main goals set by historical and critical exegetes, but retains the moderate and cautious language adopted by Fr. Augustinus Bea in Pius XII's *Divino Afflante*. On the other hand, in describing human consciousness with all its limits as instrumental to divine revelation, the suspicion arises that we are dealing with an ill-conceived, or just unripe theological scheme with the sour fruits of logically contradictory implications. God's intentions and knowledge making the text come about go certainly further than the authorial intent of the human person whom he uses for composing the text.¹⁰ Such matters as

¹⁰ In no. 12, *Dei Verbum* spells out clearly that "the right understanding of the sacred texts demands attention to the content and coherence of Scripture as a whole" and not only the whole context of the Canon, but also the whole of tradition and the

the canonical meaning, the Christological and eschatological meaning, the meaning that the text conveys in the context of the whole "economy of salvation" cannot be left out of biblical hermeneutics, but these meanings of the texts cannot be reached through the human author's consciousness. Moreover, an inspiration theory that exalts the importance of the author's state of mind at the expense of the meaning of the text, fleshed out in its literary and grammatical properties, does not reflect the Church's exegetical practice and tradition.

Unperturbed by the problems created, the conciliar text spells out in its following paragraph, the implication of the Bible's divine authorship. The document clearly turns to the patristic tradition as it declares that scriptural texts must be "read and interpreted in the same Spirit in which they were written." Then this general principle becomes fleshed out in three directions as the interpreter must keep in mind: (1) the unity of the Scriptures, (2) the living tradition of the Church, and (3) "the analogy of faith." In a somewhat timid and cursory way, yet with sufficient clarity, the document points out a twofold relationship between exegetes and the organs of the Magisterium. The exegetes' task is to elaborate the rules of interpretation and to provide help so that the judgment of the Church may grow and ripen. But it is the task of the Magisterium to make ultimate determinations and judgments about the meaning of Scriptures, for the Church has been entrusted with the task and divine mandate to preserve and interpret God's word.

C. Gaps and Incompleteness: What the Document Does Not Contain.

Short and sketchy as it is, no matter how classical and traditional this text on inspiration and interpretation appears, it has left Catholic exegetes unprepared and unaided for the exegetical crisis which followed the council.¹¹ The main issues can be enumerated in four points.

analogy of faith. But it does not spell out the *caveat* that Cardinal Dulles formulated: Catholic theology must not limit the inspired meaning of the biblical text "to the conscious intentions of the human author." A. Dulles, "Criteria of Catholic Theology" in *Communio* 22 (1995): 312.

¹¹ Again, it is not completely fair to evaluate the conciliar document against a situation that nobody could have foreseen. Reflection on inspiration and canon has always been made according to the needs and demands of an exegetical situation. The suddenness with which historico-critical exegesis triumphed and became the standard bearer of theological progressivism could not have been foreseen. Yet this fact is amply illustrated by Raymond Brown in his *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), which is nothing short of a manifesto, claiming that biblical studies will "move all Christians to think" and consequently will

1. Individual vs. Collective Inspiration

While the Council's theologians wrestled with their respective schemes of linking human and divine authorship, biblical scholars began to leave behind the concept of a biblical author (the "hagiographus" of the Council's text) as an individual and adopted various models of "collective authorship" or theories of multiple authorship, as has been required by the emergence of source theories, the modern assumptions about strains of traditions, "emerging thoughts," and developing documents. It is ironic to observe that some reflection on the very way the conciliar document *Dei Verbum* came about would have sufficed to make the "subcommittee" aware that an individualistic approach to the "inspired author" is inadequate. The text of *Dei Verbum* itself was the product of many minds, writers, and redactors in such a way that even contemporaries would have a hard time determining what the individual contributors exactly intended and meant for this or that chapter or paragraph. In other words, the concept of a "human author" and authorial intent would not be very efficient and clear when applied to the task of elucidating *Dei Verbum* itself. It would be an immensely complicated task to identify the exact redactional history of *Dei Verbum*, pinpoint its many sources from St. Irenaeus to Karl Rahner and Augustinus Bea, and identify the many hands that contributed to its subsequent redactional forms until it was finally submitted for approval to the Council Fathers. Now whose intention has determined the meaning of this or that sentence is even more difficult to tell. Thus even in non-inspired documents, with no divine authorship involved, authorial intent alone does not adequately determine the meaning of a text. The text itself has a certain objective and independent existence by which it can speak for itself, reveal its meaning. In other words, already on the human level, the meaning of a text, collectively produced by a group or several people in a sequence, cannot be reduced to what existed in the individual consciousness of the contributors.¹² For a biblical book we often project an even more complicated prehistory than that! But even if, for a given biblical text, we postulate a lower number

move all the churches to reform" (ch. VII). Those writing the text of *Dei Verbum* could not have foreseen that, within fifteen years, this kind of political activism was to take over the biblical movement.

¹² This is the greatest fallacy of Raymond Brown's seemingly crystal-clear distinction between "what the Bible meant" and "what the Bible means." (Cf. *The Critical Meaning of the Bible*, 23–44.) The mirage of "authorial intent" as the ultimate for which the exegete must hunt succeeded in seducing thousands of interpreters who, already on the level of human authorship, had been working with inadequate presuppositions.

of writers/redactors and possibly less numerous phases of redaction, talking about the “hagiographers” must include the perspective of a chain of authors and redactors working in dialogue with a community of believers and directed by providential guidance to an ultimate and final redaction, working also under inspiration, so that the process would indeed produce a fully inspired text.

In the conciliar document, was this lack of attention to the collective dimension mainly and mostly due to the fact that the traditional doctrine of inspiration has followed a precritical, and therefore naïve, individualistic model? I would not come to a hasty conclusion. What the “precritical” model of inspiration (that is, the model of inspiration in the ancient Church) has not been researched very thoroughly, often not with competency or not at all. In modern times most of those who began to speak of collective authorship, assumed that such a concern originated in recent times. But there are ample indications that, in their own way, the Church Fathers saw that the scriptural documents were depositories of traditions held in firm possession by a collectivity and also were the product of a plurality of authors. The “memoirs of the Apostles” in Justin is more a theological than literary expression about authorship: It is based on a theological tradition rather than on uninformed naïveté. The phrase “prophets and apostles” as a technical term since postapostolic times underwent many changes in use and meaning, but it carried an archaic concept of collective authorship. Traditions linking Luke to Paul and Mark to Peter have been examined in varieties of ways (mostly by method of historical criticism) and no consensus has been reached about their historical reliability. But such items of Church tradition might need to be reexamined for their theological content and may provide valuable insights into the way in which apostolic provenance of scriptural texts has been understood by tradition. Analogously one may ask what view of collective inspiration lies behind the traditional attribution of the Pentateuch to Moses, or of the wisdom books to Solomon or of the Psalms to King David? In the name of history such ways of looking at the Bible were summarily dismissed as signs of “precritical” simplicity and gullibility. We ourselves might not evade the accusation of naïveté, if we fail to realize that the Church Fathers used and transmitted such global concepts for a theological content they held and not for describing the historical genesis of the books.

2. *“Subjective” and “Objective” Inspiration*

This distinction has not been explicit or frequent in the study of biblical inspiration. However, the conceptual differentiation between “inspired

authors" (subjective inspiration) and "inspired texts" would have immensely helped the work of the conciliar subcommittee. The text of *Dei Verbum* basically departs from the concept of "double authorship" (subjective inspiration), passes over to the questions about the inspired text (objective inspiration), and comes back again to deal with the "hagiographi" (subjective inspiration), but then again speaks of the "literary genres" in the texts (objective inspiration), explaining how the authors' fully human authorship (subjective inspiration) must be conceived. In other words the text switches back and forth, meandering between inspired authors and inspired texts. Obviously, in such a context the Christological analogy of biblical inspiration, admittedly a very important concept, becomes muddled, and we never know if it applies to the relationship of the two authors (divine and human) or to the inner layers of meanings in the scriptural text. It seems to me that ancient tradition applied a Christological language to inspiration first and foremost in the objective sense: The biblical text that contains and hides God's word in a manner similar to the way in which the humanity of Christ both reveals and veils the Incarnate Word. Thus, the biblical word carries a certain "sacramental" or "theandrical" structure, as it contains God's word in human words. This Christological analogy has been current since the time of Origen, but only in modern times has it again received some attention.¹³ It has been regularly applied to the structure of the inspired biblical word, not to the way the inspired author's intellect and will are linked with the Holy Spirit. Thus ultimately, it is left open, how enlightening a Christological scheme can be for subjective inspiration, for it is rather questionable how much analogy can be established between the inspired author's "instrumental causality" and the role of Jesus' humanity in the hypostatic union.

3. Revelation, Inspiration, Canonicity

The textbooks of the 1950s pretended that in modern biblical theology these three concepts finally became disentangled and adequately distinguished. An inspired author may not be the recipient of revelation, and, in most cases, those who receive revealed truth do not become inspired authors. Such distinctions were in fact quite important for modern biblical scholarship with its tendency to question traditional views on authorship for almost every book of the Bible. The saying by Origen that only God knows who the author of the epistle to the Hebrews was became an immensely popular "quotable quote" as critical scholarship felt that such

¹³ Cf. "Inspiration and Incarnation," in Schökel, *The Inspired Word*, 49–53.

statements could be made of almost any biblical book. It was also important to regard canonicity as an ecclesial recognition of the inspired character of a book and leave open the possibility of inspired authors producing non-canonical books.

Fortunately, the final draft of *Dei Verbum* was composed by theologians who in this point successfully transcended the perspective of the “Schultheologie.” When the preparatory commission’s text was rejected, the new draft (text C), by bearing the title “De Revelatione,” assured that in the new schema revelation and inspiration would be organically linked. In fact, after presenting a renewed concept of revelation (chapter I) the document continues with the topic of “the transmission of revelation” (chapter II). It is in such context that, in chapter III, the notion of biblical inspiration appears. Inspiration is thus presented as a privileged channel by which God’s Word, revealed in human words and deeds to “prophets and apostles,” is transmitted and made accessible in written form, that is, in a stable and permanent way, to all people of subsequent time. Yet, after that, for the rest of its outline, the document becomes increasingly problematic. For it remains obscure, how and why revelation—understood as both thought and event—eventually becomes human word, first pronounced, remembered, and memorized, and then solidified and anchored against the changes of history as a written text. The lack of distinction between subjective and objective inspiration does not allow the document to give account of the transition by which the word, born in the subjectivity of the mind becomes expressed as language, tradition, and Scripture.

4. *Inerrancy*

In all textbooks of post-Tridentine and pre-Vatican theology, biblical inerrancy is said to be the most important consequence of inspiration. They make no secret of the fact that inerrancy constituted the bulk of modern problems. How can God’s authorship be reconciled with the “fully” human authorship of the hagiographs, their limited knowledge of God, man and the universe, their precritical views on history, their mistaken notion on cosmology, geography, history, and so on? In spite of the efforts made by various theological currents to limit inspiration (and thus inerrancy) to faith and morals, the Magisterium repeatedly asserted that it must be assigned to each and every part of the biblical text. The council hoped to embrace a new approach when at its third session (for scheme F) it replaced the word “inerrancy” by the positive concept of “the truth of Scripture.” But this change of vocabulary did not solve as many problems as was expected. Old issues soon reappeared in new forms as questions about

“*veritates profanae*” (specifically “*veritas historica*”) were raised. At a dramatic showdown orchestrated by Cardinal König of Vienna, a vigorous attempt was made to exclude truths from the umbrella of inerrancy or biblical truth. In a sentence that caused some consternation, the Cardinal declared: “[T]he scientific study of oriental history has demonstrated that the notions of the Bible about history and the natural sciences may some time deviate from the truth.” Then he enumerated three rather well-known examples of historical inaccuracies (Mk 2:26, Mt 27:9, and Dan 1:1). These examples should not have impressed anyone, but, because of the way they were introduced, the Cardinal’s intervention threw the future of the conciliar text into a new loop of uncertainty and confusion. As a result, text F received an emendation aimed at *restricting* the extent of inerrancy by a formal qualification stating that “salvific truth” (*veritas salutaris*) is the kind of truth Scripture teaches without error. A significant part of the Council Fathers were not pleased. Some proposed to omit the word “*salutaris*,” some would have liked to replace it by “truth about faith and morals,” some thought that a distinction between the kind of truth Scripture *teaches* and the kind it only makes reference to would sufficiently protect the text from contradicting previous papal pronouncements. But the commission decided to stick to its guns and kept the expression “*veritas salutaris*.” Amid all kinds of pressures from various groups, the issue was deferred to Pope Paul VI. The pope, in a letter written to the subcommittee, expressed his own concerns and “perplexity” (*perplexità*) about the matter, and returned the issue to the Theological Commission, asking them to drop the objectionable formula of “*veritas salutaris*” and further improve on the text. After stormy exchanges in the council and in the press, “salvific truth” was expelled from the text and was replaced in the draft with “that truth which, for the sake of our salvation, God wanted to have expressed in the Holy Scriptures.” This solution has been obviously quite helpful. It did not offer positive solutions for many of the issues lurking under the replaced catchword of “inerrancy,” yet still helped to eliminate obscurity and, according to my understanding, corrected the error implied in the sentence that would have resulted in material limitation of the extent of inspiration and of “divine authorship.”

One must recognize, and with admiration, that in the turbulent history of *Dei Verbum*, it was the papacy as an institution that came to the rescue of the Council almost like some “*deus ex machina*,” an unexpected help from above, that helped the Council avoid serious missteps and compromise its magisterial role. When John XXIII suspended work on “The Sources of Revelation,” a conciliar majority was ready to sacrifice a significant minority and keep going without them. The move of the pope

not only saved his *curia* from embarrassment, it avoided the disintegration of the council into an open conflict of two major factions. That happened at the first session and the entire Council's tone was correctly set. At the end, it was Pope Paul VI's "perplexity" that prevented the victorious "progressives" from overreaching and creating a text unfaithful to many centuries of Catholic teaching about biblical inerrancy. The pope's insistence on creating a text that is acceptable to a quasi-unanimous majority revealed again the nature and function of the Petrine ministry without which the Magisterium cannot function.

Even if, in some sense, the self-assured replacement of the concept of inerrancy by that of "salvific truth" and the subsequent removal of "salvific" with its replacement by the elusive phrase quoted above shows the inherent weakness of the document, one must regard this last-minute development at the Council as throwing new light on the "truthfulness" of the Bible and forcefully eliminating a misrepresentation of previous theologies of "inerrancy." One might again suspect that both the Council Fathers and their theologians were inadequately prepared to master their task of formulating a renewed theology of inspiration, capable of directing and confronting all the problems that had accumulated in the Church since the emergence of the historical-critical method and the modernist crisis. But obviously, the issues were not ripe enough for more significant progress in the matter.

Now we must attempt to summarize the task that the document *Dei Verbum* left for the post-Vatican II era, a task the next generation of theologians must confront and carry out.

III. Future Tasks for the Theology of Inspiration

A. Need for Monographic Research

We begin with the statement that in spite of numerous publications the topic of inspiration has suffered neglect for a considerable time.¹⁴ School books and encyclopedias repeated the same formulas and appeared unanimous that the Church Fathers' contribution was meager. Of course, they were attributing to them a naive concept of mechanical verbal inspira-

¹⁴ Here I mean first and foremost the lack of historical studies, which, in the context of Catholic theology, are indispensable for a renewal or a true repossession of tradition. In 1961, when beginning to work on a dissertation about the concept of inspiration in St. Bernard, I realized that the most "modern" attempt to assess the history of the biblical inspiration was a book by Christian Pesch from 1903! Recently a former student of mine, beginning to study inspiration in St. Augustine, stated that, since Christian Pesch's work of 1903, the only monograph on inspiration researching a particular author was my book on St. Bernard, published in 1964!

tion and literal inerrancy, which was both distorted and obsolete. What has been retained from tradition and kept influencing modern studies on biblical inspiration was only an impoverished skeleton of generalized principles, systematized under these headings: (1) God is the author of all Scriptures; (2) all Scripture is the word of God; (3) there is no error anywhere in the Bible, and finally, on this issue (4) no “development of doctrine” can be discerned. Only a few studies on medieval exegesis¹⁵ tried to discover a “trend” of increasing enlightenment starting from St. Jerome and culminating with St. Thomas Aquinas. This trend and, assumedly St. Thomas himself, favored the literal sense and anticipated as a forerunner the emergence of the historical-critical method against the aberrations of the allegorical exegesis. But in his *Exégèse médiévale*, Henri de Lubac has conclusively shown that in the matter of exegesis, St. Thomas followed the mainstream of the tradition and any attempt of turning him into a forerunner of critical exegesis is based on historical errors.¹⁶ Yet possibly de Lubac himself has made an error of omission in that he attempted to reconstruct the Church’s tradition about the senses of Scripture without investigating the foundations of all ancient exegesis, the theology of inspiration. Consequently, in both his work on Origen¹⁷ and on medieval exegesis, the inspiration concept of ancient tradition remains only implicit and fragmentary. Today, when the “recovery” of ancient exegesis has become a fashionable trademark of some “conservative” theologians,¹⁸ we need a series of monographic works investigating the inspiration theologies of such authors as Origen, St. Augustine, Gregory the Great, and other prominent figures of ancient exegesis.

B. Clarifying the Context of Biblical Inspiration

From those few studies I have made and/or read, it seems that the “locus” of the ancient theology of inspiration is to be found in the introductions

¹⁵ Cf., Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952); C. Spicq, OP, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au Moyen Age* (Paris: J.Vrin, 1944).

¹⁶ Cf. H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale* II–2 (Paris: Aubier, 1964), 285–302.

¹⁷ H. De Lubac, *Histoire et esprit* (Paris: Aubier, 1950).

¹⁸ This concept is difficult. Pointing out the inadequacies of present-day biblical exegesis does not make anyone conservative, advocating a more positive study and appreciation of patristic exegesis makes no one conservative in a pejorative sense. Nonetheless, the publication of Bibles with footnotes that do not deal with critical issues and mix modern literary and historical knowledge with patristic comments taken without critical evaluation could be called conservatism in a pejorative sense, that is, cultivation of obsolete notions and insights that have lost their validity or relevance.

of patristic and medieval commentaries, the opening paragraphs of ancient sermons, rather than in treatises, for an explicit treatment of the topic has been, indeed, scarce. A work to be studied would be, for example, the long introduction of Origen's *Commentary on John*, a marvelous, albeit difficult and sophisticated text about the different meanings of the word "euangelion." This text is, indeed, nothing short of a mini-tractate on the ancient understanding of scriptural inspiration. Similarly, the beginning of Gregory's *Moralia in Job* or the first sermon of St. Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* carry a great deal of reflection on inspiration in both the subjective and the objective senses of the term.

These and similar texts demonstrate two sides of the ancient theology of inspiration. On the one hand, they reflect a model of the "hagiographer," the charismatic person receiving a privileged understanding of the content he writes about, and, on the other hand, they contain passages about the structure of the inspired text in which the literal sense veils and reveals a deeper sense of doctrinal, moral, and eschatological dimensions. Two kinds of assertions appear: The first one belongs to the subjective, the second to the objective side of inspiration. They need to be read and evaluated not so much as a historical reconstruction of the origins of the biblical text, but as reflections upon what a Christocentric and Christological exegesis presupposes on the part of God who caused the text to come about through an inspired author and saw to it that the text be endowed and filled with revelatory meaning. One aspect that the Church Fathers and their medieval followers usually emphasize when dealing with the inspired author is the correspondence they saw between the roles of human author and the biblical interpreter. They cultivated a concept of hermeneutics in which author and interpreter mirror each other, and, in fact, to a large extent, their theory about the inspiration was the mirror image of their thoughts about interpretation.

These pronouncements about inspired authors, texts, and interpreters must be looked at not as historicizing projections about imaginary authors and their inner lives, but rather as an extension of a theology of revelation. They fit exactly into that context which *Dei Verbum* assigned to the theology of inspiration but could not fully carry out. The main issue is the "transmission" of God's revealed truth, a truth becoming known in experiential encounters with the "words and deeds" of "sacred history" (or "the economy of salvation") by those from whom Scriptures have taken their origins. Then in the transmission of revelation certain chosen persons play an essential role. They are often reduced to generic stereotypes as "prophets and apostles," but their idealized image is based on facts and historical memory of the Old Testament's prophets and Jesus' apostles and their disciples.

Behind these stereotypical figures there is an understanding of God speaking to man through chosen persons whose identity and historical personality is in itself not as relevant as the schematized notion of a mediating role between God and his people by acts which chosen individuals carry out as they perceive and deliver divine thought and in the way they lead by acting and speaking—and only secondarily by writing. Thus, in ancient theologies of inspiration this “human author” is most often referred to as one who “speaks,” so that in ancient texts the majority of scriptural quotations refer to what Moses or Jesus or Paul say rather than what can be read in written records about them.

It is in this theological context that we should examine how the “double” authorship of God and the hagiographer was verifiable both theologically and historically. It might turn out just that the old, schematized figures of the scriptural authors is quite applicable to collectivities of concrete historical human beings, who, in the same process by which the Church came about, played their role of leadership and mediation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, bringing the memory of prophetic and apostolic preaching into written forms in the way God wanted these to be recorded in his Church’s sacred books. Such a theology of revelation must aim at explaining both how the Scriptures were records of sacred history that came about concomitantly with that history itself and are, at the same time, instrumental in further extending this very same history as an ongoing process of (analogously) inspired encounters with God within the Church, by both communities and individual believers.

Such a theology of inspiration would see the chief effect of inspiration not in inerrancy but in the presence of a spiritual fullness in the biblical text, a capability to reveal not only truths but ultimately the One who said “I am the Truth.” Briefly, inspiration assures the quasi-sacramental qualities of the inspired text insofar as it is capable of conveying Christological sense to those who read it in faith (as *Dei Verbum* puts it: according to the analogy of faith) and under the living influence of the Holy Spirit.

The theology of inspiration should recapture the Trinitarian vision of the ancient Church Fathers, by assigning to the Father the ultimate “authorship” of Scriptures, as their originator and initiator, to the Son the role of the main protagonist (auctor/actor), and to the Holy Spirit the function of moving, guiding, and determining the activities of the human “inspired author” and of the “inspired reader.”

Another need is to recapture the meaning of “verbal inspiration” and to rediscover its meaning in the context of divine authorship, that is, in reference to what “God intends to say” in Scripture. It seems that the idea of God “keeping vigil” or “guarding” (the Hebrew word is “shomer,” cf.

Jer 1:12) over his word has never ceased to echo among God's people. Regardless how much contempt "verbal inspiration" has received in recent times, it belongs to the deposit of faith that divine inspiration does not only affect the ideas contained in Scripture, but also their verbal expression. Not only the authors, but also the text is inspired. This tenet of faith implies that God's special providence watched over the process by which all biblical books and each of their parts came about so that the end result can be said to be truly his word. However, maintaining and justifying such affirmations require that divine authorship be rigorously affirmed as transcendental and only analogous to a human author's activity by which he narrates a story or explains a thought, writes a poem, or composes a letter. God made Paul write a particular letter to Philemon, but only analogously and remotely can we say that God wrote a letter to Philemon. God made John write the Book of Revelation, using a person whose Greek was deficient, but God did not commit grammatical mistakes. Nor can we say that when authoring the first part of Isaiah, God showed a remarkable talent for poetry while later, he showed significantly less talent. Rather, he used a human being whom he had previously given a remarkable literary talent for creative writing, and later he used one less endowed with such human qualities. Thus, elaborating on the analogous concept of divine authorship, we give room for making affirmations about God's authorship, and for saying that he, in an authorial sense, but only analogously, affected the very form of the text with all its concreteness.

IV. Conclusion: A Synthesis in the Making

The above considerations converge to envision a treatise on inspiration serving as an introduction to the theological study of Scripture. This treatise would belong to systematic theology (possibly within Fundamental Theology) and would entail the following units.

1. A Trinitarian understanding of revelation would be the general framework. For this the first two chapters of *Dei Verbum* provide the model. What the conciliar document did not sufficiently elaborate is the relationship of the "economy of salvation" to what is often called "natural revelation." In this regard, one may say that both the historical and speculative dimensions of the question need a great deal of further study. On the one hand, there is much patristic reflection on God's self-disclosure to the philosophers, the religious thinkers, and the saints of pre-Christian antiquity; on the other hand, since the Romantic era, a positive appraisal of non-Christian religions has become fashionable but often lacking either intellectual rigor or

orthodoxy or both. Furthermore, the medieval topic of the “two books”—nature and Bible—as a double source of knowing God is a fascinating image, which could help our study at this point. While it has gone through many transformations, it has not yet been integrated into a system of Fundamental Theology obtaining general or even wide acceptance.

2. The social dimension of the economy of salvation needs to be explored: God speaks to man through human mediation. On the one hand, he addresses the human being in this way because an integral aspect of salvation is to create authentic human community and to sanctify and elevate man’s naturally social nature into participation in the Trinitarian nature of God. On the other hand, man receives salvific grace with the task of sharing it and thus extending God’s presence and reign in the community of man. Thus, God’s self-disclosure constitutes “prophets and apostles”—charismatically gifted human beings whose ministry transmits the knowledge of God in the world. This happens in “words and deeds,” not merely in concepts, experiences, or insights. The charism of transmitting God’s knowledge affects language and speech as well as action.
3. The economy of salvation is Christocentric. It is not a merely linear sequence of divine self-communications but one single dispensation of grace through the incarnate Son. Since the Son is fully incarnate, he has a specific prehistory beginning with Abraham and all salvific action is mediated through him. The “prophets” mean those who anticipate his word and presence; the “apostles” mean in a wider sense all those who extend his mediating role until the end of times. God’s inspired word means quintessentially Christ, verbally it means his preaching, scripturally it means the gospels in which his “words and deeds” are expressed in written form, as remembered by the founding generation of his Church built on the foundation of his chosen disciples and their head, the chosen Rock, Peter.
4. Jesus and his apostles spoke and acted “in fulfillment of the Scriptures,” the prophetic word accumulated, distilled, and redacted into sacred literature through the special history that prepared the coming of the Incarnate Word. By their ministry, Jesus and his apostles enlightened the believers about the inspired character of the written records of Israel’s salvation history. In this sense the Christian canonicity of the Old Testament, although ultimately also “prophetic” (that is, based on the tradition of Israel), is “apostolic” (that is, its guarantee

and credibility are received from their apostolic attestation). In this way the Scriptures form a tryptich with Jesus in the middle, anticipated by the prophets (or “the Law and the Prophets”) on one side, and extended on the other by the apostles, among whom the “columns” (Peter, James, and John, with Paul who attests them to be columns; cf. Gal 4:20) stand out. This tryptich is often simplified in the understanding of the Church as a dyptich, that is, a twofold collection, Old and New Testaments, whose unity is guaranteed by the one Christ who mediates all divine self-disclosure. For “no one knows the Son but the Father and no one knows the Father but the Son and to whomever he is pleased to reveal him” (Mt 11:27).

5. In this framework one reflects on
 - a. God as author of the Scriptures,
 - b. the nature of inspiration as charism given to human mediators of the word,
 - c. the ecclesiastic nature and purpose of the charism of inspiration, and
 - d. the providential character of God’s infallible assistance by which he accompanies his word from its “conception” as an idea in minds to its “birth” as utterance, growth, and development (taking shape while being transmitted and redacted), and its final enshrinement in humanly created, preserved, finalized texts.
6. Such a treatment of biblical inspiration should arrive at rediscovering the “sacramental” character of Scripture as the main consequence of its divinely inspired origin. Thus one would transcend not only the perspective of inerrancy as “the main consequence of inspiration,” but also the timid statements of *Dei Verbum* about the “truth of Scripture,” meaning the propositional truth of its affirmations insofar as they express in human language, as if in a chain of assertions, “that truth which, for the sake of man’s salvation, God wanted to be expressed in the inspired text.” Instead, one would reconstruct the Christological outlook of tradition on Scripture with statements of the following kind: By its inspired character each part of the Bible offers a path to Christ who is that Truth that God offered mankind for the sake of salvation. This fullness of meaning or “spiritual sense” that the Church Fathers affirmed to be accessible through each and every part of Scripture is not a collection of propositions in one-to-one correspondence with the individual grammatical units of the biblical text,

but the ultimate sense of the whole, in which the unity, sacredness, relevance, and sanctifying force of the Bible lies. Of course, it is inaccessible without reference to the unity of the two testaments or the “canonical principle,” which links the books with each other, or without the readers’ rootedness in faith by which the sacred text as such is recognized. Nor is such a vision applicable to a scriptural text without the reader’s reliance on “the same Spirit” who had inspired the text and provided it with such a fullness of meaning.

One would expect that an adequate theology of inspiration would succeed in laying foundations to a renewed theological hermeneutics, bringing us (theologians, preachers, catechists, Bible-reading Christians of all sorts) to a more profitable biblical culture and practice in the Church. **N V**