

Dei Verbum: The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

1. Historical Context

The document *Dei Verbum* (Word of God) is one of only two dogmatic constitutions issued by the Second Vatican Council, the other being *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. As such *Dei Verbum* (henceforth DV) is one of the most authoritative and important documents of the Council. Its purpose is to spell out the Church's understanding of the nature of revelation, that is, the process whereby God communicates with human beings. As such it touches on questions about Scripture, tradition and the teaching authority of the Church.

The remote context of this document is the emergence of historical consciousness in the 18th and 19th centuries and the impact that this had on the understanding of the Scriptures. Historians began to adopt new more historical ways of reading the Bible, and this had flow-on effects into the whole understanding of both the Bible and Church tradition. At the end of the 19th century a movement arose, called Modernism, which sought to accommodate the Church to some of these new understandings. While this movement went too far in seeking to relativise tradition and Church authority and was thus condemned by the Church, the impact of historical consciousness itself could not be suppressed. In his ground-breaking encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), Pius XII gave permission to Catholic scripture scholars to adopt new ways of reading the scriptures which were more congruent with these new historical methods. Nonetheless there remained general suspicion about these methods, and those scholars which adopted them continued to suffer from accusations and recriminations.

The work of the Second Vatican Council brought new developments. With the calling of the Council it was clear that any document on the topic of revelation would be the place where this battle would be fought out. As was the accepted process a preparatory commission, under the direction of Cardinal Ottaviani, put together a draft document which was meant to form the starting point for the discussions of the Council. This first draft was largely shaped by debates going back to the Reformation, and spoke of two sources of revelation, Scripture and Tradition. Further it continued to treat the Bible in an unhistorical manner, not in the manner congruent with historically conscious approaches. Finally it contained various condemnations and warnings which were not in line with the more pastoral approach desired by Pope John XXIII.

Although this draft was opposed by the majority of the bishops, the vote did not achieve the two-thirds majority needed to reject it altogether. At this point Pope John personally intervened and had the document withdrawn and completely redrafted. This action of Pope John represented a major shift in the processes of the Council. It lessened the power of the preparatory commissions which were dominated by theologians who were unfamiliar with and suspicious of the type of historical methodologies which were being introduced into the study of theology. It gave the bishops more room to move in relation to other preparatory documents which reflected similar limitations.

In its final form, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 18 November 1965, *Dei Verbum* continues the trajectory initiated by *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, allowing Catholic scripture scholars to read the Bible as arising within particular social and cultural contexts. It places this insight, however,

within a larger framework of divine revelation and the role of the Church's teaching authority. As such it needs to be read in the context of *Lumen Gentium* (LG), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, particularly those parts on the teaching authority of the Church.

2. Overview of the document

After a brief prologue, the document has six major chapters:

1. Divine Revelation Itself
2. The Transmission of Divine Revelation
3. Sacred Scripture: Its Divine Inspiration and Its Interpretation
4. The Old Testament
5. The New Testament
6. Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church

As is clear from this structure, the major concern of the document is to proclaim a Catholic understanding of the Bible as the “word of God”. This understanding is placed within the larger context of the Church’s understanding of revelation itself. Here the document speaks not of revelation about God, but the revelation of God – “It pleased God in his goodness and wisdom to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will” (n.2, see also n.6)). Theologians will pick up this theme and speak of revelation as “divine self-communication”, that is, God communicates his very self to us, making us “sharers in the divine nature” (n.2). The document places revelation in the context of God’s saving will operating in history, or “salvation history”. Both the inner Word of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit play a role in revelation, which thus has a Trinitarian structure. These are all significant theological advances on previous Church documents.

The second chapter deals with the relationship between Scripture and Tradition in the context of the transmission of revelation within the Church. The role of the apostles and their successors the bishops is highlighted. Most significant here is the close relationship that the document identifies between Scripture and Tradition. Rather than positing two sources of revelation, as had earlier been the case, it speaks of one “divine wellspring” (n.9) making up a single “deposit of faith” entrusted to the Church (n.10). The authentic interpretation of the word of God is entrusted to the teaching office of the Church, which is not “above the word of God, but serves it” (n.10).

The third chapter contains the basic principles whereby Catholic scripture scholars should approach the Bible. Thus it continues the teaching of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* by encouraging scholars to read the Bible within its historical context. While it is true that God speaks through the Bible, the human authors remain “true authors”, not just secretaries taking dictation from God. God speaks through them “in human fashion”. So in order to understand the biblical text it is necessary to pay attention to the “literary forms” of the text, for example whether it is historical, or poetic or prophetic. We must understand the “customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative” (n.12) of the authors if we are not to misunderstand what the author intends to convey.

The chapters on the Old and New Testament place these books within the history of salvation that lies at the core of these collections. For the Church the New Testament is hidden in the Old Testament, and the true meaning of the Old Testament is made manifest in the New Testament. A special place is held by the Gospels, with the Church maintaining their apostolic origin and historical intent. Nonetheless, in line with modern historical approaches, the document recognises that the Gospels are not diaries of Jesus’ life, but are mediated through the interests of the Church of the time (n.19).

The final chapter places Scripture in the life of the Church. In a way that would have surprised many Catholics the Council taught that the “Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the [eucharistic] Body of the Lord” (n.21). The document encouraged Catholics to read the Bible and in particular urged theologians and priests to become more thoroughly formed by the Bible. Quoting St Jerome, an early biblical scholar and translator of the Bible, it reminds us that “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”.

3. Key points and quotations from document

Revelation has a Trinitarian structure and is manifest in history

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). ... This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation. (n.2)

Revelation is a divine self-communication

Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, He chose to share with them those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind. (n.6)

There is one source of revelation, God, with two modes of transmission

Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence. (n.9)

The Magisterium (teaching office of the Church) is the servant of the word

This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed. (n.10)

The human authors of Scripture are true authors

In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted. (n.11)

The scriptures are inspired

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation. (n.11)

Interpretation requires attention to the literary forms of the text

... the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to "literary forms." For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. (n.12)

There is an intrinsic relationship between Old and New Testaments

God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New. For, though Christ established the new covenant in His blood (see Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), still the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament (see Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27; Rom. 16:25-26; 2 Cor. 14:16) and in turn shed light on it and explain it. (n.16)

The Church maintains that the Gospels are of apostolic origin

The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what the Apostles preached in fulfillment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of faith, namely, the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. (n.18)

The Church upholds the historicity of the Gospels

Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven (see Acts 1:1). (n.19)

The role of the Church in the writing of the Gospels

The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches and preserving the form of proclamation but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus. (n.19)

The Church venerates the Bible

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body. She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith, since, as inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles. (n.21)

Theology finds its foundation in the Scriptures

Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word. For the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and since they are inspired really are the word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology. (n.24)

4. Reception

Dei Verbum has had a profound effect on the life of the Church. Taken together with the reform of the liturgy, Scripture now has a central place in the life of the Church and in the faith of ordinary Catholics. Prior to the Council an interest in the Bible was somehow seen as “protestant”, whereas Catholics took their stand on Tradition. *Dei Verbum* required a major reorientation of this attitude. Catholics learnt that they were to venerate the Scriptures as they venerate the Eucharistic presence. They learnt to respect the inner relationship between Scripture and Tradition, not to view them in opposition as was often the case in anti-protestant polemic. In many places this new orientation led to people taking up study of the Scriptures either in an informal or a more formal way.

Just as importantly however, *Dei Verbum* consolidated new historical approaches to the Scriptures by insisting that they be read in their historical context according to the intention of their human authors and in light of their literary forms. This was an explicit rejection of a literalist or fundamentalist approach to the Bible, which reads the Bible without paying attention to the historical and cultural context of the text. While *Divino Afflante Spiritu* had initiated this change in the way Catholics could read the Bible, *Dei Verbum* established it as the norm. This led to a completely new way of teaching the Bible in seminary formation programs around the world. Historical methods, which previously had been suspect, now became the accepted way of approaching the Bible. This was a major shift whose implications for the Church are still unfolding.

One very important implication has been that Scripture study is now largely an ecumenical discipline. Scholars from all the mainstream Churches have adopted the same historical approaches in the study of the Scriptures. In many cases this meant Catholic scholars catching up with their Protestant colleagues who had been using these approaches for some time. The study of theology generally has also been transformed by the insistence of *Dei Verbum* that the Bible become the “soul” of theology. Whereas prior to Vatican II theology was dominated by a philosophical and neo-Scholastic approach, after the Council theologians turned more and more to the Bible, trying to incorporate the results of a renewed Scripture scholarship into their researches. This has been particularly evident in the area of Christology, where several theologians produced works which reflected the new Biblical scholarship.

More broadly, theology has been impacted by the way in which *Dei Verbum* speaks about the nature of revelation. Previously revelation had been thought of in propositional terms, that is, God revealed certain things (propositions) which we were then required to believe, for example, that there are three persons in God. In contrast *Dei Verbum* spoke not about the communication of propositions, but of a divine self-communication, that is, God communicates his very being to us. Further this act of self-communication has a Trinitarian structure, not just a Trinitarian content. It is a communication in Word and Spirit as God’s very presence in history. Again this has assisted theology in understanding not just the Scriptures historically but also the whole process of revelation, including a more historical approach to Church dogmas.

Finally the new emphasis on the Scriptures found in *Dei Verbum* has changed Catholic prayer and spirituality, making us far more biblical in the ways in which we turn to God. Prayers and hymns more often reflect biblical images and themes.

5. Discussion Questions

1. How would you explain the difference between understanding revelation as “the communication of propositions to be believed” and revelation as “divine self-communication”?
2. To what extent would you agree or disagree with the claim that Catholics reverence the Scriptures as they reverence the presence of Christ in the Eucharist?
3. To what extent are Catholics “in the pews” aware of the teaching of *Dei Verbum* of the need to read the Bible in its historical and cultural context with due attention to its “literary forms”?
4. How might an understanding of the literary form of Genesis 1 steer us away from reading it as a literal account of creation?
5. How does the teaching of *Dei Verbum* help us recognise that the Gospels can be “historical” without implying that they are diary accounts of Jesus’ life?
6. How do you understand the teaching of *Dei Verbum* that the Magisterium is both the authentic interpreter of the word of God and its servant?
7. How do you understand the relationship between the Scripture and tradition in light of the teaching of *Dei Verbum*?

6. Bibliography

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Witherup, R. D. *Scripture: Dei Verbum. Rediscovering Vatican II*. New York/Mahwah , NJ: Paulist Press, 2006.

7. Weblinks

This is a link to a document by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, entitled “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”, written in 1993 and presented to Pope John Paul II. It reaffirms the Church’s commitment to a critical historical reading of the Bible.

http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp.htm

This site presents a collection of articles on Dei Verbum, including one by then Cardinal Ratzinger.

<http://www.deiverbum2005.org/Articels/articles.htm>

Two Australian contributions to the meaning of *Dei Verbum*

http://www.catalyst-for-renewal.com.au/virginia_bourke.htm

<http://www.catalyst-for-renewal.com.au/moloney.htm>

A leading Australian biblical scholar, Brendan Byrne sj on Catholic biblical scholarship:

http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aet_1/Byrne.htm

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dei_Verbum