DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.01268.x

Dei Verbum: Fit for Purpose?

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Abstract

Arguably one of the most well received of the documents of Vatican II, this article considers the gestation of *Dei Verbum* and whether it remains key to Catholic thinking on revelation, exegesis, hermeneutics and the use of the Bible in the Church.

Insofar as *Dei Verbum* enabled Catholicism to rediscover its own sacramental paradigm of revelation, it can be said to have effected a decisive move away from a propositional view which risks reducing the drama of salvation to a combination of bullet points and performance indicators. Moreover, Catholic biblical theology has enjoyed a welcome renaissance in these subsequent decades and scripture now plays a more obvious part in liturgy and piety.

Though there are lacunae (e.g. anthropology, ecology), and though some of the exegetical tensions have been by-passed by postmodern hermeneutics, perhaps the more interesting questions that remain will centre not on the scriptures but on a renewed understanding of the nature of tradition and the creativity of its relationship with the magisterium.

Keywords

Dei Verbum, Revelation, Vatican II, Hermeneutics, Sola Scriptura

The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei verbum* is a key part of the theological heritage and future promise of Vatican II. In this document the theologian encounters the expressed thinking of the Council Fathers on 'Divine Revelation' and hence one considers matters of perennial importance for Catholic theology. At this distance, some 40 years after the end of the Council, one task is to consider the extent to which the document still nourishes our thinking. Phrasing this in more crass managerial jargon, the question emerges, "To what extent is *Dei verbum* 'fit for purpose' in the practice of Catholic theology today?"

By way of introduction I hereby offer some personal remarks concerning *Dei verbum*. Subsequently, in the body of the article, I touch on its background, gestation and reception as a Conciliar document

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2008.01268.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

before a consideration of its contemporary significance in the final section. It will be my contention that this particular document remains a pivotal reference point for Catholic theologians in their service of the People of God.

Preliminary Personal Remarks

I recently asked a busy Vatican II scholar about the significance of *Dei verbum* and without pause he replied "It articulated the personal nature of God's revelation, restored scripture as the soul of theology, liberated biblical studies and put a theological end to anti-Semitism."[1] Any one of these contributions to post-Conciliar theology would have been significant but that many of us would concur with these comments does indicate that this relatively brief document has had a fruitful impact.

Take for example the notion of Scripture as the "soul of theology."[2] It is a commonplace to present Vatican II as some kind of liberation from a dark age of thinking, and almost compulsory to back the argument up with a garish anecdote. So here goes. During the 1930s in Ireland, an enterprising travelling salesman arrived in Carracastle, County Mayo to sell "Douai-Rheims Bibles – every Catholic home should have one". He did business aplenty, but the following Sunday the Parish Priest ordered all copies to be brought immediately to the village square whereupon having fulminated about Protestant practices and the dangers of reading the Word of God, he set fire to the lot.

As the crowd dispersed, my father and his friend, who had both witnessed this spectacle, rescued a charred copy from the pyre. "Mad for reading" as he later described it, they eagerly turned the pages and long before the end of Genesis, after encountering fratricide, genocide, incest and sodomy, they came to the conclusion that the Parish Priest was right.

In sharp contrast to such fiery clerical suspicion, when I began my theological studies in Rome some 15 years after the Council, Scripture had become the *punto di partenza*, 'the starting-point', for everything. Understandings of God, the Church, the Sacraments, were explained in an evolutionary (if not 'emergent') manner beginning in the Old Testament segueing in the New Testament followed by the understanding apparent in the Early Church, the Fathers and so on. *Dei verbum* was presented as a liberating *Magna Carta* for theology which was continually (and perhaps unfairly) contrasted with the

[1] Michael Hayes, St. Mary's University College, Strawberry Hill, 5 September 2008.
[2] *Providentissimus Deus,* §16.

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somewhat theologically retentive *fides et ratio* tones of *Dei filius* from Vatican I. Since both were ancient history as far as I was concerned (!) I did not feel obliged to buy into this polarized view. However, key proposals of the later document, namely, that revelation is the self-communication of God, that its purpose is love and that theology should be worked out through a methodological interplay between Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium, did give direction to my thinking and have continued to influence the way I practise my craft. And since I am not alone in being a *Dei verbum* baby, it may be salutary to review the origination of the document, to explore some of the tensions within the text and to consider its efficacy in the theological and liturgical life of the Church today.

Two-sources of Tension

Among conciliar documents, *Dei verbum* had one of the most difficult gestations. The text was not finalized until the last session of the Council by which time the first draft *Schema constitutionis dogmaticae de fontibus revelationis* of 13 July 1962, prepared under the aegis of Cardinal Ottaviani from the Holy Office, had long been sidelined. This *duobus fontibus,* 'two-source' document had been rejected because of its unjustified proposal of a mutual independence between Tradition and Scripture and its over-emphasis on the superiority of the former.[3] Due in part to alternative submissions from luminaries such as Rahner and Congar as well as stakeholders from the Secretariat for Christian Unity there was a groundswell of discontent and an inconclusive vote on whether to halt discussion on the schema in November 1962 led to the direct intervention of John XXIII. The Pope handed over the responsibility for redrafting to a new special commission chaired by Cardinals Ottaviani and Bea with Tromp and Willebrands as secretaries, thus bringing a decidedly ecumenical purview into proceedings. Even the initial efforts of this commission did not meet with approval and detailed work was ceded in March 1964 to yet another team of seven council fathers (including Archbishop Florit and Abbot Butler) along with nineteen *periti* that included Congar, Rahner, Colombo and eventually the young Josef Ratzinger. Bishop Charue of Namur chaired this sub-commission and Umberto Betti acted as secretary to the proceedings. *De divina revelatione* was the working title of what eventually emerged as *Dei verbum.*[4]

[3] See e.g. J. Komonchak, 'The Preparation of Vatican II', in G. Alberigo and J. Komonchak (eds), *History of Vatican II* (New York: Orbis, 1995–2006), Vol. I, pp. 304–306.

[4] See e.g. J. Ratzinger, A. Grillmeier and B. Rigaux in H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), Vol. III, pp. 155–272.

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At this distance it is surely important to leave behind a 'Cowboys and Indians' view of the Council,[5] but it is nonetheless true that because the original draft had focused on 'Tradition' and 'Scripture' as the two sources of revelation, it was perhaps inevitable that reaching common agreement in the balancing of such core themes would prove difficult. From the time of Trent, 'Tradition' had come to sound a decidedly Catholic note, whilst 'Scripture' (as witnessed in Carracastle) resonated with a somewhat Protestant tone. It is saying nothing particularly original to record that there were tensions between Council Fathers who wanted to emphasize a Catholic distinctiveness and those who wanted to emphasize commonality with other Christians. Perhaps more fundamentally, from the original submissions which the numerous bishops of the world had forwarded to Rome, there appears to have been considerable demand for the kind of definitive teaching in this area that could be crystallized into the anathemas typical of past Conciliar pronouncements.[6] It can be forgotten that a core reason given for the calling of the Council was to devise a new Code of Canon Law and the propositional mentality required by such a task was already well established in the minds of Catholic bishops and in theological methodology. Typically ahead of his time, Abbot Butler used computing imagery to describe the view of revelation that he felt had to be jettisoned for the Council and the Church to make progress. Interviewed in the *Clergy Review* he remarked that:

> It has come to be an almost traditional point of view in ordinary Catholic theological thinking that the type or exemplar of revelation was the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai: a group of ten propositions, from which, of course, the doctors of the law proceeded to make their deductions *ad infinitum,* and to apply in all sorts of new circumstances. Thus the whole idea of revelation begins with propositions and concepts and ends with propositions and concepts. I always say that if this is the right way to look at revelation and theology's work on revelation we are living in a very fortunate period of the world's history at the present time simply because we have electronic computers: we should be able to feed into these computers the right questions and do the work of 2000 years of theological reflexion in about a half-hour. Now when one comes to a conclusion like this, one might well suspect that there is something wrong with that sort of presentation of revelation.[7]

[5] G. Weigel quoted in N. Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims,* (London: DLT, 2008) p. 241. In chapter 16, 'What happened at Vatican II,' Lash alerts the reader to some of the tensions, not least within the contemporary Italian Church, surrounding the historiography of the Council.

[6] See e.g. É. Fouilloux in G. Alberigo and J. Komonchak, *Op. cit.* Vol. I, pp. 97–166.

[7] 'The Vatican Council on Divine Revelation: An Interview with Abbot Butler' *Clergy Review* Vol. 50: 9 (1965), p. 660.

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It is hardly contentious to suggest that by 1965 this view accurately captured the prevailing mood of the Council which was emphasizing a personal rather than propositional view of revelation – Jesus was a divine human being, not a set of bullet points. In affirming the one source of revelation, God's self-communicating love, and by privileging the Scriptural testimony to God's action, there had been a swing of the theological pendulum. However, by the fourth session of the Council some contributors were concerned that the final draft could be read to imply that all Christian revelation was articulated in Scripture, a characteristically Protestant rather than Catholic position. Thus *Dei verbum* would undermine the complementary role of Tradition in Catholic theology which had been so robustly defended both at Trent and at Vatican I – "This truth and way of life is contained in the written books and the unwritten traditions which the Apostles received (either) from the mouth of Christ himself or by the dictation of Holy Spirit which almost by hand have been passed on down to us."[8]

Exegetical Tensions

If there was tension in the discussions regarding the mutuality of Tradition and Scripture, there were similar intensities surrounding the mutuality of Catholic biblical scholarship and the Magisterium.[9] From the time of Leo XIII (1878–1903) Catholic biblical scholars had experienced what might be described as trial by traffic light. Leo gave a green for 'Go' with *Providentissimus Deus* in 1893 which among other things gave scholars permission to go beyond the hallowed confines of the Latin Vulgate text. Although Pius X went on to establish the Pontifical Biblical Institute in 1909, the anti-Modernist encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* of 1908 had red light implications for Scripture scholars as it vehemently decried textual criticism and source theories of the Pentateuch. In its enthusiasm for the subject, Benedict XV's *Spiritus Paraclitus* on the anniversary of St. Jerome in 1920 might merit an amber as might Pius XI's sponsorship of Scripture studies in *Bibliorum scientiam* of 1924. Pius XII certainly gave a green in the ground-breaking *Divino afflante spiritu* of 1943 which clearly acknowledged the importance of literary genres for the interpretation of Scriptural testimony and spoke of the *synkatabasis* – the divine 'condescension' of God in speaking to us in human

[8] *Hanc veritatem et disciplinam contineri in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus, quae ab ipsius Christi ore ab Apostolis acceptae aut ab ipsis Apostolis Spiritu Sancto dictante quasi per manus traditae ad nos usque pervenerunt,* (DS 1501 & 3006).

[9] As well as documents collected by A. Filippi and E. Lora in the *Enchiridion Biblicum,* (Bologna, Dehoniane, 1993) a useful resource for English speakers is D.P. Béchard (ed., trans.) *The Scripture Documents,* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002).

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language. Unfortunately he then set up a speed camera with *Humani generis* in 1950 which seemed to ring fence Genesis as a twenty mile an hour zone since its anthropology appeared to depend upon a fairly literal reading of the biblical picture of our origin from one couple.

By the time of John XXIII it would be fair to say that Catholic exegesis was in a state of confusion. In much the same way as Communism was casting an ideological shadow over discussions concerning the Church and the World, so was radical historico-critical method haunting Catholic biblical theology. Tempers were frayed on the eve of the Council and a public controversy in Rome between scholars at the Lateran and the Biblicum led to mutual accusations and teaching suspensions.[10] In some ways this ill wind did blow some good since it served to provoke serious discussion not just among the convening Fathers but also explicitly within the Pontifical Biblical Commission itself. These deliberations eventually found expression in the document *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* issued in 1964 which by guardedly acknowledging the value inherent in the judicious use of critical exegetical methodologies not only allowed Catholic biblical scholars to use new tools of analysis and work fruitfully alongside their Protestant counterparts, but also rehearsed the dynamic, revelatory view of Scripture which would be definitively articulated the following year in the Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei verbum.*

The Final Text & Promulgation

The respective roles of Tradition and Scripture in revelation and the safeguarding of the document from historico-critical excess remained sources of anxiety until the final session of the Council. Although the long process of distillation may have had some merit, by late 1965 all parties were keenly aware that after four years the Council Fathers were tiring of the back and forth process of approvals, followed by the submission of modifications to committee, followed by re-presentations in plenary session, *ad infinitum*. Although 'progressives' had made much of the running in the development of the schema, 'traditionalists' such as Franic and Siri became increasingly troubled and at the eleventh hour began to lobby the Pope directly. The upshot was that the final acts of the *Dei verbum* drama appear to

[10] The trouble brewed following a speech by John XXIII, 16 February 1960, to the Pontifical Biblical Institute (The Biblicum) which warned of exegetical excess – see AAS 52 155 OTC §886. L.A. Schökel responded with 'Dove va l'esegesi cattolica?' in *Civiltà Cattolica* III. 2645, (3 September 1960) insisting that new pathways had opened up under Pius XII. The reply from A. Romeo,'L'Enciclica "Divino afflante Spiritu" e le "Opiniones Nouveau"', *Divinitas* 4 (1960), pp. 387–456 begged to differ. The Holy Office intervened and suspended the Biblicum scholars S. Lyonnet and M. Zerwick in 1961. See J.G. Prior, *The Historical Critical Method in Catholic Exegesis,* Tesi Gregoriana n.50, (Rome: P.U.G., 2001), pp. 129–149. Butler also alludes to this dispute, *Op.cit.* Vol. 50, p. 665.

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have been somewhat stage-managed by Ottaviani and Bea on behalf of Papa Montini. Cardinal Bea took the chair and 'resolved' three disputed matters behind closed doors at a meeting of the Doctrinal Commission on October 19th 1965.[11]

This eleventh-hour activity did however yield somewhat anomalous results. Hence regarding the first disputed point on the sources of revelation, in the middle of this ecumenically irenic Conciliar document, the explosive phrase *non sola scriptura* was inserted towards the end of section 9 to cement the idea that Tradition was essential. The final text therefore read, "Consequently it is not from Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed".[12] This troubled observers, given that even conservatives such as Parente (Archbishop of Perugia) had earlier expressly foregone such a statement in the name of ecumenical sensitivity.[13]

Sensitive to reductionist views of the biblical testimony, two further aspects of the document were revised. The first was the phrase that Scripture teaches *veritas salutaris*, "saving truth", which characterized the nature of biblical inerrancy and the second was the statement that the evangelists wrote "that we might know the honest truth about Jesus".[14] which was an attempt to vouchsafe the veracity of the Gospels. These statements did not assuage everyone. When read in a reductionist manner, that Scripture contains "saving truth" might mirror consubstantiation – bits of it were divine, but not all of it was inspired. Without the Eucharistic analogy, this was Paul VI's position.[15] For others, the plea for the "honest truth" of the evangelists did not adequately defend the epistemological objectivity of the Gospels which needed to be defended against 'Bultmania.'

Invited by Bea to strengthen the text, Mgr Philips volunteered to replace "saving truth" with "the truth which for our salvation God willed should be recorded in the sacred writings".[16] In the heat of the moment this carried the day yet it effectively amounted to exactly the same thing as "saving truth" but used more words. In like manner, the eventual text strengthened the tone of section 19 which affirms

[11] C. Theobald in G. Alberigo and J. Komonchak, *Op. cit.* Vol. V, pp. 321–334.

[12] DV §9 *Quo fit ut Ecclesia certitudinem suam de omnibus revelatis non per solam Sacram Scripturam hauriat.*

[13] Only weeks earlier Butler had confidently predicted that "Anglicans will be delighted with the schema's presentation of the Bible as the saving word of God. And, of course, they should be delighted to find that this document does not canonize the post-Tridentine theory of the insufficiency of Scripture", *Op. cit.,* Vol. 50, p. 669. Laurentin blamed this on the climate of fear engendered by Bea's unexpected intervention and the general impression that he had come with a mandate from the Pope to get the *modi* accepted – cf. Theobald in G. Alberigo and J. Komonchak, *Op. cit.,* Vol. V, p. 336.

[14] DV §19 *ut vera et sincera de Iesu nobiscum communicarent.*

[15] See J. Prignon's report of Montini's meeting with Charue, 12 October 1965 cited by Theobald in G. Alberigo and J. Komonchak, *Op. cit.,* Vol. V, p. 325.

[16] DV §11 *veritatem, quam Deus nostrae salutis causa, Litteris Sacris consignari voluit.*

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the truth of the Gospels by adding "whose historicity [the Church] unhesitatingly asserts."[17] The commission's job done (whether they liked it or not), the revised text could then proceed to promulgation on 18 November 1965.

Reception of the Document

Given that the schema which eventually yielded *Dei verbum* had accompanied the Council Fathers throughout the four sessions of the Council, it is perhaps disappointing to note that its thunder was somewhat stolen by Paul VI's announcement that he was initiating the canonization process of Pius XII and John XXIII. In England some ten days later, *The Tablet* of 28 November 1965, though much preoccupied with the crisis in Rhodesia, did offer somewhat contrasting reflections on the Dogmatic Constitution from Abbot Butler and Douglas Woodruff. As one might expect, Butler was enthusiastic and ultimately saw in the document "an echo of the great creative mind of Newman."[18] Woodruff, a *Tablet* editor of considerable pedigree, offered a more ambivalent view. For him this text underlined the importance of the *periti* at the Council "silent in the *aula* but so effective in the commissions. . .one of the few confident prophecies that can be made about the outcome of Vatican II is that there is going to be a great deal more theology, self-confident, often adventurous". However, by linking this prophecy with divisions within Protestantism, Woodruff appeared to be warning of the possibility of Catholic fragmentation.[19]

Ecumenical observers were on the whole very positive and, as a brief example, the *Tablet* of 17 December recorded that the Lutheran Kirsten Skydsgaard regarded it as the "most important of all the Council decrees and would be of great significance for the continuation of the ecumenical dialogue."[20] Congar had written on the day of promulgation that it was "A great document that provides theology with the *means* to become fully evangelical".[21] Scripture scholars were certainly unfettered and Catholic biblical scholarship gratefully and immediately flourished, exemplified by the gushing dedications to Pius XII and Cardinal Bea in the first edition of the Jerome Biblical Commentary.[22]

[17] DV §19 *quorum historicitatem incunctanter affirmat.*

[18] 'Divine Revelation: Scripture, Tradition and Scholarship', *The Tablet,* Vol. CCIX (1965) p. 1318.

[19] 'The Day of the "Periti" and a Warning on Aggiornamento', *Ibid.,* p. 1319.

[20] 'News and Notes', *The Tablet,* Vol. (1965) p. 1396.

[21] Quoted by C. Theobald in G. Alberigo and J. Komonchak, *Op. cit.,* Vol V, p. 353.

[22] R.E. Brown, J. Fitzmyer (eds.), *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

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If these immediate thoughts were positive, twenty-five years after the Council, Rino Fisichella could confidently assert that: "It is safe to say that the Dogmatic Consitution *Dei verbum* is the most significant document to emerge from the Second Vatican Council. . .. All the important themes of the Christian faith are dealt with in it, but *Dei verbum* also contains a step forward in dogmatic teaching and, what is more, a fresh presentation of it to the contemporary reader".[23] *Dei verbum* almost embarrassingly dominates the first tome of a three-volume twenty-five year anniversary compendium produced by scholars at the Pontifical Gregorian University.[24] The fortieth anniversary of the document saw its lustre undimmed. Its praises have been extolled by Adrian Graffy in the *Pastoral Review*[25] and echoed in Gerald O'Collins' *Living Vatican II – Twenty First Council for the Twentieth Century*.[26]

Speaking recently, O'Collins has remarked that in belatedly making peace with a sacramental view of revelation, *viz.* God's self-communication through words and deeds, *Dei verbum* articulates what should have been second-nature to Catholicism. It classically privileges the notion of revelation as a living encounter which is articulated secondarily in propositions. Although it doesn't say everything – it is light on anthropology for example – it has been formative for an entire generation of theologians and is a good example of how the 'canon of the sixteen documents' should be read together, the thinking of the Fathers being found in the whole range of proclamations with *Dei verbum* being complemented notably in *Gaudium et spes* and *Ad gentes*.[27]

In sum it is fair to say that *Dei verbum* has remained one of the most well-received documents of the Council, yet whilst this sentiment is amply echoed in Nicholas Lash's *Theology for Pilgrims*, the author does draw attention to tinkerings with translations by the CDF which, though not totally Orwellian in nature, do hint that some influential theologians appear to have reservations regarding the text[28]. It therefore behoves us to consider some of these concerns

[23] R. Latourelle and R. Fisichella, (eds.), *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology,* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) s.v. 'Dei verbum.'

[24] R. Latourelle (ed.), *Vaticano II: Bilancio e Prospettivi venticinque anni dopo,* Vol. I (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1987).

[25] A. Graffy, 'Dei verbum: Before and After', *The Pastoral Review*, Vol. 1:6 (2005) pp. 48–55.

[26] G. O'Collins, *Living Vatican II – Twenty First Council for the Twentieth Century,* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), pp. 8–9, 150.

[27] G. O'Collins, St. Mary's University College, Strawberry Hill, 1 September 2008.

[28] N. Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims,* (London: DLT, 2008), pp. 249–252. Lash takes Cardinal William Levada of the CDF to task for his ill-considered defence of the *sensus plenior* reading of Scripture which relies on a mistranslation of the Conciliar text.

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that *Dei verbum* might not be quite 'fit for purpose' and to offer one or two contributions to the current theological conversation.

The Return of Propositional Revelation?

It is perhaps helpful to recall that in the 80s even someone as positive as Latourelle was critical that the Council could have offered more in the way of Catholic apologetics. *Dei verbum* would have been the natural place to look for robust arguments regarding the credibility of the Christian revelation and there is a lament that the faithful were left to be hounded by the wolves of unbelief.[29] Hence whilst we may be grateful that the document moves away from the pattern of analysis and anathema that characterize the certainties of past councils, it is not self-evident that the dynamic, optimistic model of revelation presented in *Dei verbum* has served the Church well. Rhône Blondellian existentialism imbibed with Rhine Hegelian historicism would be a heady draught even outside the giddy *Zeitgeist* of the 60s.[30] If there is any truth in Russell's caricature of Hegelian history as "jellied thought" it might be conceded that Vatican II was high on flavour, high on e-numbers of expectancy and left a whole generation of Catholics experiencing a cold turkey of confusion as churches, convents and seminaries emptied. Not so much, "How far can you go?" as "How far gone are you?"

On the choppy oceans of post-modernism, without the 'Spirit of Vatican II' to fill the battered sails of the faithful and with the Petrine ark left looking more like a white-water raft, it is hardly surprising that the two dominant figures of the post-Vatican II Church, Karol Wojtyla and Josef Ratzinger, have put a firmer hand to the rudder. A campaign of 'Catholic Identity Therapy' seems *inter alia* to have informed the more propositional stance of John Paul II regarding faith and morals[31] and Papa Ratzinger's continued close interest in

[29] 'The Absence and Presence of Fundamental Theology at Vatican II' in R. Latourelle (ed.), *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives Twenty-five Years After,* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), Vol. III, pp. 378–415. On page 390 he writes: "While Bultmann was carrying out his work of demolition, the Council was silent over fundamental theology – the discipline that could have countered it on several major fronts. The question of the identity of Jesus and the historical signs that substantiate his claim as the Son of the Father is at the very heart of Christianity. In this respect, we would very happily have seen a Constitution as short and condensed as *Dei verbum,* but on Christ and the problems of Christology, added to the three documents on the Church, (*Lumen gentium, Gaudium et spes,* and *Ad gentes*), since Christ was just as much in need of rehabilitation as the Church was."

[30] Blondel's importance at Vatican II is discussed by, for example, Butler in *Clergy Review (Vol 50, 1965)*, pp. 664–665 and echoed by the Swiss philosopher P. Henrici SJ who has also long proposed connections between Blondel and Hegel.

[31] A document such as *Veritatis splendor* (1993) probably owes its engaging biblical methodology to the influence of *Dei verbum,* but its crystallized hermeneutics of sin echo the tones of pre-conciliar manuals.

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biblical hermeneutics.[32] The effect of this has been a higher profile for the Papal Magisterium in its ordinary teaching role and as arbitrator of the revealed mysteries. Yet with such giant figures leading the interpretation of the Conciliar heritage for 30 years now, it might be argued that, whilst laudably christo-centric in theory, *Dei verbum* is proving too ecclesio-centric in practice to ready Catholics for religious pluralism in either its benign or aggressive forms. The sound three-legged school of Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium (*DV* §10)[33] has become at best a little lop-sided and at worst almost impossible for some theologians to sit on in the light of papal missives such as *Ad tuendam fidem* (1998) which seems very much to favour the Magisterial prop over the other two.

Scripture in Scholarship, Scripture in Church

With regard to Scripture, this article will restrict itself to two comments, one in relation to exegesis and the second in relation to the use of the Bible in the life of the Church. First, we can see from the text of *Dei verbum* that the traditional claims about inerrancy, inspiration and the privileged interpretative position of the Church are balanced with an explicit acknowledgement of literary genres and exegetical tasks in section 12. This somewhat belated welcome for historico-critical methodology immediately allowed Catholic scholarship to shine and, without ignoring luminaries on our own shores (Orchard, Wansborough, King, Redford etc.), especial mention should also be made of the outstanding generation of scholars from the USA (such as Brown, Fitzmyer, Collins, Perkins, Schneiders, Malina, *et al*).

Unfortunately (?), its hegemony as a method was already on the wane by the early 1980s in part due to its own dogmatism, ("Why swap an infallible priority of Matthew for an infallible priority of Mark?") and in part due to a Heideggerian/Derridan hermeneutical landscape, ("Why bother what it meant back then when I'm more bothered about what it means for me?"). Catholic exegetes hardly remained charitable never mind united. At one point, the syntactical exegete Laurentin alluded to Brown's analysis of the Infancy Narratives as "the excrement of historical research".[34] The great American

[32] See, for example, J. Ratzinger, 'On the relationship between the Magisterium and Exegetes' (10 May 2003). This address on the 100th anniversary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission is available via the website of the Holy See.

[33] "It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls."

[34] R. Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'Enfance,* (Paris: Desclée, 1982) p. 439.

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scholar replied in kind that since he was not French, he might be "genetically defective in his appreciation" of the semiotic approach.[35]

Since then, the explosion of different readings of Scripture in subsequent years – liberational, narrative, feminist, black, colonial, psychological, reader response etc. – have somewhat 'de-prioritized' a number of the traditional aspirations of historico-critical exegesis. Many, including Benedict XVI, see this as liberating in that it allows space for the return of the *sensus plenior*, 'the fuller sense' of Scripture, which *inter alia* permits a rehabilitation of patristic commentaries with typological, spiritual and allegorical readings of Scripture.[36] However, it may leave more Antiochene systematic theologians a little uneasy, especially since the very thrust of *Dei verbum* roots the revelation of God's love in the historical testimony of the Incarnate Word.

The other comment I would make concerns the use of Scripture in Church. Whilst the power of a renewed sense of the Word of God is evident among Catholic Bible study groups and in the life of Base Communities and new movements such as Focolare, Neocatechumenate and the Charismatic Renewal, it is rare to find similar excitement in the liturgical context where there can be a dominance of word over symbol that may not be entirely appropriate. The liturgy is an experience that involves mysteries and the *arrēta hrēmata,* words which cannot be spoken, (2 Cor 12:4). Four separate/disparate Scripture readings, a homily and a rack of prolix bidding prayers can easily lead to verbose offerings from 'the table of the word' that are ultimately indigestible. Hence whilst accepting that the proposals of the final chapter of *Dei verbum* cohere well with *Sacrosanctum concilium*, it is not entirely surprising that the Tridentine rite, with its de-emphasized scriptural component, has been revived, since it can be understood in part as an attempt to recapture symbolism, silence and 'Catholic imagination' as key components of liturgy.

Fit for Purpose?

As a biblical period, 'forty' denotes a time of transformation and in the years that have passed since Vatican II, *Dei verbum* has effected a metamorphosis. It does seem to have inspired a profound change in the patterning of Catholic theology which it has rendered at once more biblical, more historical and more personal. In this sense,

[35] R. E. Brown, 'More polemical than instructive: R. Laurentin on the Infancy Narratives', *Marianum* Vol. 47 (1985) p. 191.

[36] Somewhat controversially he invokes the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle from quantum physics as part of the argument – cf. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), pp. 105–8.

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Dei verbum remains "alive and active" not only in the academy but also among the people of God. Certainly in my own experience of teaching both Biblical and Systematic Theology, it remains a luminous reference point. By proposing an understanding of revelation in general and by grappling with vexed questions of hermeneutics and authority, *Dei verbum* both articulates and holds together the tensions between the individual believer and the community that underpin the nature of the Church.

Like the Scriptures themselves, however, *Dei verbum* is a document that is at once divine and human and there are perhaps *lacunae* which could be revisited. As an example, a further exploration of the meaning of 'Tradition' with its authentic discernment through ordinary and extraordinary Magisterium might be timely. An understanding that Tradition is engendered by the "fertilization of the Church by the action of the Holy Spirit,"[37] would emphasize that every epoch has the task of recognizing the signs of *its* times. Hence whether ones looks back with gratitude or suspicion at Vatican II and its documents, the task of contemporary theologians is to revisit and re-present the most enduring of their insights in current debate. At Vatican II, the plenary sessions included a solemn enthroning of the Gospels, symbolically expressing the wonder of revelation, the divine condescension, the sovereignty of the Word of God in the Conciliar assembly.[38] Insofar as *Dei verbum* captures and expresses this mystery it remains 'fit for purpose' for both practitioners and students of Catholic theology who in the 'spirit of Vatican II' should take care not to embalm it but be emboldened by it.

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[37] E. Duffy, in conference at the *Catholic Theological Association,* Ushaw College, Sept. 9th, 2008.

[38] See S. G. A. Luff, 'The Enthronement of the Gospels at the Council' in *Clergy Review,* Vol. 50: 9 (1965), pp. 670–674

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