

**PRESENTATIONS ON THE VATICAN II COUNCIL –
PART II – DEI VERBUM: HEARING THE WORD OF GOD**

I. In the two century lead-up to Dei Verbum, the Church had been developing her teaching on Divine Revelation in response to worldly skepticism and to excessive pietism.

A. As the so-called Enlightenment era spread in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Church was confronted with other challenges, both from those who rejected the inerrancy of Scriptures and those who would adopt a more pietistic approach now associated with fundamentalism.

1. In the eighteenth century, geological evidence was beginning to indicate that the world was at least some millions of years old. Furthermore, fossil evidence was beginning to indicate that many species had lived and died out long ago. Alone, these discoveries were not a problem for the Church, for many exegetes such as Origin and Augustine had read the creation accounts of Genesis in a metaphorical fashion. However, many people tried to pit science and philosophy against religion. These attempts reached a height with Darwin's theory of natural selection. The physical application of this theory itself did not contradict the faith; but many implications people took from it, such as the idea that man is nothing but an advanced ape, are contrary to the faith.

2. Even within the Christian faith, many theologians, exemplified by the German Lutheran Rudolf Bultmann, began to say that Scriptures may be inspired, but were erroneous in many details. They said that we have to get beyond the factual assertions to the realm of faith. Thus, for example, many people, both liberal Protestants and non-Christians, tried to downplay everything supernatural in the Bible, such as miracles, prophesy and the divinity of Christ.

B. The First Vatican Council, called in 1870, issued two decrees, one of which was on faith and reason.

1. In chapter II, on Revelation, it endorsed the Scholastic notion that Revelation is entirely true, as intended by the author, and reveals both things we could not naturally know by reason alone, and others things accessible to reason, but so important to our salvation that God wanted to confirm them. It affirmed that the Holy Spirit is the author of all of Scripture and that, therefore, there can be no admixture of error. It also affirmed that humans, using their own industry and talents, were also authors of Scripture.

2. The Council affirmed the Church's authority to interpret Scripture definitively. But it also confirmed that the books of the Bible were inspired and inerrant when written, as opposed to the view that the Church's approval is what made them valuable. The Council was confirming that the Bible is not

simply a collection of good writings that the Holy Spirit guided the Church to use, but rather was inspired by God from the beginning.

- C. In 1893, Pope Leo XIII took on both rationalism, which would reject all things that cannot be established by reason alone, and pietism, which would reject the role of reason in interpreting Scriptures. See Providentissimus Deus, On the Study of Scriptures.
1. Pope Leo XIII began the encyclical letter with a clear endorsement of efforts to study Scripture and make it more available to the public, but also a warning about those who would “defile or corrupt it.”
 - He said that knowing Scripture is necessary to know the truths of the faith, and essential for oratory regarding the faith. He began a long tradition in the Church of quoting St. Jerome, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.”
 2. After reviewing briefly the history of Scriptural interpretation, he called for clerics and scriptural scholars to confront “our adversaries” who “defuse their deadly poison by means of books, pamphlets and newspapers.” The deadly poison is the rationalist belief that would dismiss the Bible as the inspired word of God.
 3. Recognizing the need for study of the Bible, against those who said that its meaning is always clear, he called for a careful preparation of clerics and scholars. In particular, he argued that the Church Fathers had great authority in interpreting the Bible and should be studied carefully.
 4. He reiterated the need always to interpret Scripture with the “analogy of faith,” that is in the context of Church teachings, never contradicting them. Within the boundaries of Church teachings, he argued there remains a great deal of freedom.
 5. Recognizing the legitimate advances of modern knowledge, he affirmed that greater knowledge of ancient languages and scientific history is very helpful. But he criticized the excessive use of such studies as though Scripture could be critiqued like any other book.
 - a. He argued very strongly that there can never be any real conflict between faith and science, and that any apparent conflict is due to a misreading of one or the other.
 - b. In particular, he affirmed that, while Scripture deals with real historical events, the authors “did not seek to penetrate secrets of nature, but rather described and dealt with things in more or less figurative language, or in terms which were commonly used at the time.”

6. He concluded by affirming strongly the inspiration and therefore inerrancy of all of Scripture, although granting that study is needed to understand the true meaning that the sacred authors were conveying.

D. In 1943, during the 50th anniversary year of Providentissimus Deus, Pope Pius XII published the next great encyclical letter on Scriptures, Divino Afflante Spiritu, in which he called for greater studies in Scripture and for care in understanding the literal sense and building upon it.

1. At this point, in the midst of World War II, Pope Pius was dealing with a different problem, namely, those who would defend the value of the Bible, but wanted to put a primarily “spiritual” meaning on it, avoiding the historical meaning.
2. Pope Pius XII began by reviewing the progress in studies that had occurred since Providentissimus Deus, including the founding of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and increase in Scriptural studies in seminaries and among the laity.
3. Given the new advancement in understanding of archeology, linguistics, and history, Pope Pius XII called for a great use of them. He also approved of the study of ancient texts to establish exactly what the ancient codices of the Bible said and what the best translation of them would be. He argued that, when the Council of Trent said that the Vulgate was authoritative, it did not mean that there could be no improvements, but rather that it was reliable and accurate on all matters of faith and morals.
4. Pope Pius XII then emphasized strongly that one should always begin reading Scripture by understanding the literal sense, i.e. the sense that the author intended. He argued that other sciences should be used for this purpose so that the sacred texts may be more understandable. Like Pope Leo XIII, he emphasized that all interpretations must be consistent with Catholic teachings.
5. He then said that there are other spiritual senses that spring from the literal sense. The human author may not have known about these senses, but the Holy Spirit did, and thus the deeper senses are still a part of the Bible. But the Pope also warned about depending too heavily on “figurative” meanings from Scripture that have little to do with the plain meaning. He said that such meanings may be sometimes helpful, but are not as powerful as the word of God.
 - As with Leo XIII, he emphasized that one should especially consult the Church Fathers in deriving meanings from a text.

6. Pope Pius XII cautioned against getting too far afield with extraneous research so that people study about the Bible in an academic fashion, but do not draw forth the riches of the Bible itself. For Scriptures are “of themselves rich in original meaning; endowed with divine power, they have their own value; adorned with heavenly beauty, they radiate of themselves light and splendor” and offer to the intelligent “treasures of wisdom and prudence.”

7. In speaking of the literal sense, Pope Pius XII drew even more attention to the fact that one must recognize the author’s way of writing. As he said, “the ancient peoples of the East, in order to express their ideas, did not always employ those forms or kinds of speech that we use today.” He praised efforts to understand ancient ways of writing in order to understand the Bible.

8. He recognized that there will be continual difficulties in understanding Scripture and in reconciling some different passages of the Bible, or aspects of the Bible with beliefs from other fields of knowledge. But he said that such difficulties are nothing new and are a motive for further studies. In particular, he cited St. Augustine in saying, “God wished difficulties to be scattered through the Sacred Books inspired by Him, in order that we might be urged to read and scrutinize them more carefully.”

II. The Vatican II Council returned to the subject of the Bible in Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation (1965), one of its four central documents.

A. The document begins by calling for an understanding that there is one unified plan of salvation, manifested in God’s saving actions, of which His Son’s Incarnation, life, death, and Resurrection are the climax. God gave us Revelation to make this plan of salvation clear. Part of the idea is to remind people that salvation is through salvation won by Jesus Christ, and that the Bible is a means to the end of attaining this salvation, not simply an academic or theological field.

B. The Council first focused on the interaction between Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church.

1. The Council emphasized a teaching that had been in the Church for centuries, but often in the background. In particular, it declared that Sacred Tradition is part of Revelation alongside of the Bible. This Sacred Tradition is the practices and traditions handed down from the Apostles throughout time, the “wealth [that] is poured into the practice and life of the Church.” Examples of Sacred Tradition are the canon of books in the Bible, the roles of the clergy, and the structure of the Mass.

2. The Council emphasized that the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church, can authentically interpret Revelation. The Magisterium “is not above the word of God,” but instead at its service.

3. Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium make up what would come to be called the “tripod of truth,” sources of divinely guaranteed teachings that support each other in guiding us toward the greater kingdom. See, e.g., United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “The Council at 50: Vatican II’s Word on the Word of God” (October 18, 2012) at uscbb.org.

C. The Council then set forth the teaching regarding a rightful understanding of the inerrancy of the Bible.

1. The Council reaffirmed that the inspired character of the Bible. It declared again that each and every part of the Scripture, individually and as a whole, is the inspired word of God and thus without error. It concludes with a crucial line, “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 the truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.”

2. But the Council then pointed out that the inspired writers used various literary forms. Thus one must understand the types of literature in the Bible to understand what the author was really asserting, which may not be the surface level meaning. Building on an image of Pope Pius XII, the document states, “For the words of God, expressed in human language have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of the Eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men.”

3. Crucially, the Council reaffirmed three principles that must be used in interpreting the Bible.

- a. First, one must focus on “the content and unity of the whole of Scripture.” In other words, one part of the Bible should be interpreted in light of the rest, not in contradiction to it.
- b. Second, one should interpret the Bible in the context of “the living tradition of the whole Church.”
- c. Third, one should interpret the Bible consistently with the teachings of the Church, who has “the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.”

C. The Council emphasized the unity of the Old and New Testament, saying that “the books of the Old Testament, all of them giving a place in the preaching of the Gospel, attain and display their full meaning in the New Testament and in turn shed light upon it and explain it.”

1. The Council recommended study and reverence of the books of the Old Testament because, even though much of their material is “imperfect and provisional,” they still show forth the glorious and saving Providence of God,

gives excellent examples and advice, and have “a wonderful treasury of prayers.” In addition, one can understand the New Testament in full only with a knowledge of the background from the Old Testament. There was then, and to some degree is now, a tendency to downplay the Old Testament as dated and too difficult to understand; the Council calls for a different view, that the Old Testament has great value for all people.

2. The Council affirmed that the whole of the New Testament “had an apostolic origin.” Although parts of it were written by people other than Apostles, such as Luke and Mark, those authors were directly connected to the Apostles. (Thus arguments that some of the Pauline letters were written by someone other than St. Paul do not contradict the faith, so long as it is understood that the authors were connected to St. Paul or another Apostle.)

3. The Council also affirmed the historicity of the Gospels, saying that “the four Gospels . . . , 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.” The Council did say that the words and deeds of Christ recorded in the Gospels are often a “synthesis,” but an accurate one.

D. In the conclusion the Council called for a greater study of the word of God with a “constant vigor of renewal.” For “in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power of the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life.”