

Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 16 in a series

2014

Holy Family continues to observe the 50th anniversary of Vatican II, which began on October 11, 1962, and closed on December 8, 1965. We're marking this milestone anniversary by celebrating the council, and exploring its teachings through special bulletin covers and inserts, newsletter articles, videos and other materials.

Dei Verbum: God's Word

Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, was one of the hardest-fought documents of the entire council. Discussion on the church and the scriptures began in the first session, and the constitution went through a number of drafts before it was finally approved at the end of the fourth session.

The Church and Scripture

The church has always honored the scriptures as the revealed word of God. Jesus himself cited the scriptures often, and all four Gospels make reference to the Old Testament in recounting the life of Christ. The early Church Fathers explored the scriptures in great depths, writing voluminous commentaries on both the New and the Old Testaments. St. Jerome translated the scriptures out of their original languages into Latin because Latin was the vernacular of his day: he wanted to make the scriptures more accessible, because, in his famous phrase, "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ."

But over the centuries, the church's relation with the scriptures began to show some strain. While the scriptures continued to be cited in official teachings, the church condemned innovators like John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, who translated the scriptures into vernacular languages and encouraged ordinary people to read the Bible. At the beginning of the 16th century, Martin Luther (appalled at the ignorance of scripture, even among the clergy) began to emphasize the importance of the Bible. After his break with Rome, *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone") became his rallying cry. In response to this, the Catholic Church emphasized that scripture is not the only source of divine revelation, but that God also speaks through the church itself – through tradition. Catholics were not exactly forbidden to read the Bible, but they certainly were not encouraged to do so. (Ronald Witherup, SS cites an instance from 1812 when Pope Pius VII censured a bishop for encouraging the laity to read the Bible [*Scripture: Dei Verbum*, p. 134, note 8].)

New advances in scripture scholarship beginning in the 18th century brought new strain. The development of the historical-critical method – a scientific approach to exploration of the texts – shed new light on the scriptures but also raised questions about the historicity of some Biblical texts. While Pope Leo XIII opened the way for Catholic scholars to join in the advance of biblical research, there was a definite love-hate relationship with the new approaches to scripture. Only with Pope Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of 1943 did this approach receive official sanction.



At every session of the Council, the Book of the Gospels was enthroned in the midst of the Fathers, a clear sign of the centrality of the Scriptures in the life of the Church.

The Development of *Dei Verbum*

But the tensions were far from over, and they came to the fore in the debates on scripture in the first session of the council. Some wanted to reinforce the church's teaching at the Councils of Trent and Vatican I.

But others wanted to move forward and to see the church involved in the new scholarship. Blessed Pope John XXIII intervened, creating a new "mixed commission" of representatives of both viewpoints to create a new document. That intervention bore fruit as, gradually and at times painfully, the Council Fathers found common ground. Here are a few of

the key teachings of *Dei Verbum*:

- There are not two sources of revelation, Scripture and Tradition. Rather, these are two expressions of the revelation that flows from a single source. "Sacred Tradition and the holy scriptures of each of the two testaments resemble a mirror in which the church, during her journeying on earth, contemplates God, from whom she receives all things, until she may be brought to see him, face to face, as he is" (7). "Sacred Tradition... and holy scripture are closely joined and connected, each with the other. Both spring from the same divine fountain, and so in some manner merge into a unity, and tend towards the same end.... Both scripture and tradition should be accepted with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence" (9).
- The scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit and they "teach certainly, faithfully, and without error the truth that God for our salvation willed to be recorded in holy Writ" (11). But since God has chosen to speak by means of human authors, it is important to "investigate what the sacred writers really intended to signify" (12). Thus we need to understand the "literary forms of expression" and "the conditions of his time and of his culture" (12) and also to understand "the living tradition of the whole church" (12).
- The Old Testament books are also divinely inspired and "of permanent value" (14), both for the "vivid perception of God" they present and because within them "lies hidden the mystery of our salvation": God "has wisely provided that the New Testament should be concealed in the Old, and that the Old Testament should be made manifest in the new" (15-16).
- The church affirms the historicity of the Gospels, while at the same time acknowledging that they have their origins in oral tradition, and that each Gospel writer "made a selection of some of the many things that had been transmitted orally or in writing" (19).
- All the faithful can and should study the scriptures. "For Christ's faithful the approach to holy scripture should lie wide open" (22).

Corinna Laughlin, Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy
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