



## “For the Sake of Our Salvation” A Re-reading of *Dei Verbum* After 40 Years from an European Perspective

Daniel Kosch



*Dr. Daniel Kosch is a theologian who for nine years headed the biblical pastoral ministry department of the Swiss Catholic Biblical Association. From 1996 till 2001 he was the moderator of the Executive Committee of the CBF. Since 2001 he has been the general secretary of the Roman Catholic Central Conference of Switzerland (RKZ).*

A forty-year anniversary does not justify a “real” jubilee. A Jubilee Year is celebrated, after all, only at the end of 7 x 7 years. But the forty-year timeframe is – in the context of the Bible – a highly significant one: for 40 years the People of God journeyed through the desert. This time of the Exodus was marked by such different experiences as the liberation from slavery, the yearning for the land of promise, the victory song of Miriam, nostalgia for the flesh pots of Egypt, the authority and the rejection of Moses, the gift of the ten commandments, the dance around the golden calf, power struggles among people in leadership roles, the manna miracle and the crises resulting from the people’s hunger, thirst and overall despondency. All these experiences have echoes in the later history of the People of God as well: Even after the entrance into the “Promised Land” the liberating presence of the “I am there” (Ex 3:14) was experienced only in the context of history, to which belonged dark, even dismal sides alongside the bright.

For many Christians – even beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church – the Vatican Council was an “experience of liberation”. Images such as that of the “open window and doors”, expressions such as “a leap forward” (John XXIII, in the opening address *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, Nr. 15), theological buzz terms such as that of “the pilgrim People of God” go back directly or indirectly to the language of the central biblical narratives of liberation, those of the Exodus and of the resurrection. That even the 40 year history of the life of the Catholic Church that came out of and followed the experience of the Council has many parallels to the stories of the wandering of the People of God in the desert is actually not so astounding from this point of view. But de facto many people refer incessantly to the “letter” and the “spirit” of the Council, as if these could spare the Church the experiences of wandering in the desert, as though everything with the Council were once and for all, “the plain truth”. The Council then becomes a kind of magical formula that serves to make the whole contradictory cha-

acter of the Church’s experiences with itself in the world of today resolve into a kind of euphoric “satisfaction”. Others seem to treat the Council as a “closed event of the past” that was more an expression of the optimistic *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s than of the Spirit of God and that has no enduring significance. Such a view relativizes the Council’s lasting significance. Both the lofty memorialization and the relativizing dismissal of the Council amount to the notion that an exodus could be had without the immediately following years of wandering in the desert, as though Moses were only a liberator of his people and not also a deadly slugger, as though Miriam had only sung a victory song and not also suffered setbacks through the pride of male leaders, as though the leaders of the people were always at one and never wrestled for power and influence at the expense of those entrusted to them, as though the ten commandments were revealed without a hitch, but the tablets of the Law never got broken.

What I wish to indicate with this reference to the 40 years of desert-wandering by the People of God in view of the Council as a whole could also be said in particular of its “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation”. An approach to *Dei Verbum* marked by a biblical realism will, of course, interpret this document – together with the other Council documents – as a central testimony to that “leap forward” that John XXIII was trying to achieve with the Council, and which the Council actually effected. But such a realistic approach will also take into account the fact that this liberation experience must be tested along the way of the Church through the wilderness of everyday life, and that setbacks, ambiguities and conflicts will therefore always be connected with it – not only in the time of the beginnings, in that of the appropriation of the Council’s thought by the first generation, but also beyond this period.

In such a perspective, on the one hand, we need to ask about the direction-setting, motivating and inspiring challenges of the Constitution on Divine Revelation, which has been assessed by some as “not yet well received in many of its parts” (Cardinal Karl Lehmann), but by others as the “center and standard of the Council” (Elmar Klinger). And, on the other hand, we should also take a look at those statements which might have raised exaggerated or false expectations. Finally, we must take into account the fact that what the Council



says about the inspired scriptures, namely that they are marked by “the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer” (DV 12) applies preeminently to the conciliar Constitution itself. To these characteristic traits belong, for example, the patriarchal style of the Constitution (written before the emergence of feminist theology), the state of the discussion on exegesis and methodology that was dominant at the time (before the wider reception of literary-critical, more strongly synchronic forms of reading) or the lack of a hermeneutic of doubt with respect to dangerous tendencies within the biblical heritage (before a critical outworking of the problem of the biblical roots of Christian anti-Judaism).

### “God has revealed Himself” (DV 2)

One of the most important ways in which *Dei Verbum* went beyond earlier official Church statements on Revelation is “that revelation [in the Constitution] is understood as the self-communication of God and should therefore henceforth no longer be wrongly understood as a purely intellectual matter, a mere communication of statements about God and his saving intentions. It is by no means to be seen only in word and teaching, but as an integral unity of deed and verbal revelation, as an event-based interaction of God with humanity, to which the word spoken to faith belongs as an essential inner moment.” (Karl Rahner/Herbert Vorgrimler, *Kleines Konzilskompendium*, Freiburg 1978, 362).

Revelation consists, then, not primarily of statements, which are to be believed as “true”, nor primarily of divine “instructions” that are to be followed, but rather of the “witness” to the fact “that God is with us, to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal” (DV 4). This understanding of revelation might be described in terms of the following series of qualifiers: It is something personal, dialogical, integral and historical. The response of man to this revelation is neither a purely intellectual one nor is it a consent imposed by authority; rather it is the “obedience of faith”; “an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God” (DV 5).

### “For man’s salvation” (DV 6)

“The salvation of men” (DV 6), “of all nations” (DV 7), “of souls” (DV 10), “our salvation” (DV 12) or the salvation “of the whole human race” (DV 14), “salvation for all who believe” (DV 17) are repeatedly named as the goal of this self-communication of God in word and deed. The Word of God is then first of all “message of salvation” for “the whole world” (DV 1).

The God who communicates himself, who “uninterruptedly converses” with the Church (DV 8, cf. DV 21 and 25, where the reading of Scripture is characterized as a kind of conversation between God and man) wishes to be, or rather is himself the “salvation” of men and of the world. In saying this, *Dei Verbum* not only captures a basic trait of the biblical message. Rather, this “soteriological principle” also amounts to a fundamental axiom for the interpretation of Scripture, based as it is on its central affirmations: Scripture teaches “solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of our salvation” (DV 11) and “must be read and interpreted in the same spirit in which it was written” (DV 12).



The criterion for the inerrant truth of Scripture is the service to man’s salvation. The way in which it brings to expression the absolute saving will of God is, however, marked by the “characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer” (DV 12). Such a perspective not only recognizes the right and necessity of “historical criticism” and the attention that should be paid to “literary forms”; but it also formulates a substance-critical (*sachkritisches*) principle. Analogously to Luther’s principle “was Christum treibet” (whatever promotes Christ) one could express the Council’s principle in the following terms: Scripture is sure, reliable and without error to the extent that “it serves man’s salvation”. It is only logical to assume that this principle also applies to sacred tradition and to the teaching office of the Church. They should “contribute effectively to the salvation of souls” (DV 10). Unfortunately, *Dei Verbum* does not explicitly make the point that the enunciated principles apply in the first place to the magisterial teachings themselves, that official church teaching is always expressed in time-conditioned forms and that one can therefore “rightly understand” the tradition and official church teachings only if one interprets them contextually. But what applies to the “inspired authors” of Holy Scripture must first of all apply to those persons who “authentically interpret”



these (DV 10). Their statements, too, contain “incomplete and time-conditioned” elements (DV 15).

### The “task of exegetes” and the “judgement of the Church” (DV 12)

The acknowledgment of the fact that in Scripture God “speaks through men in human fashion” (DV 12) and the connected recognition of the “historical character” of the Gospels and the fact that their authors explained the Jesus tradition “in view of the situation of their churches” (DV 19) logically implies that exegetes have an important role in the Church. One cannot do without historical research and a knowledge of literary forms “for the correct understanding of what the sacred author [and God through him – D.K.] wanted to assert” (DV 12). “It is the task of exegetes to work according to these rules toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgement of the Church may mature.” (DV 12) “And so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology” (DV 24).

The significance and relevancy of these statements goes far beyond the associated regard for Bible studies and for scientific exegesis. The entire preaching of the Church must take into account the historical character and the human form and transmission of the truths of Faith – and the magisterium of the Church not only has “the task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on” (DV 10), but also that of learning from those who interpret Scripture “so that ... the judgement of the Church may mature” (DV 12).

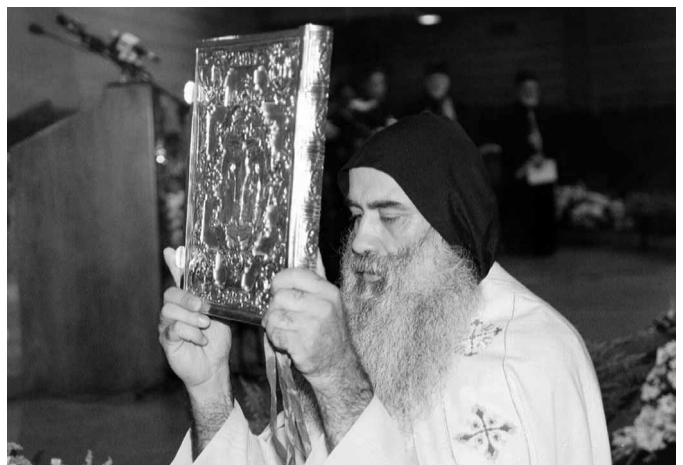
The question must once again be raised as to how seriously the magisterium takes this task: does it take the scientific preparatory work carefully into account, even when it questions many things? Does it take into account, for example, in its official use of sayings of Jesus in the world catechism, that we are not dealing with historical witnesses in the modern sense of the term? Is its attitude toward theologians – for example in its statements on their role in the Church – in the first place one of “learning” and “readiness to listen”, or is its tone rather that of the “teacher”, the “one who knows”?

The statements of *Dei Verbum* are already somewhat ambivalent on this point: the programmatic statement is made, to be sure: “This teaching office is not above the Word of God, but serves it” (DV 10), but immediately thereafter a kind of “pre-established harmony” (O.H. Pesch) between Bible, tradition and magisterium is expressed. And following the commissioning of exegetes to the required “preparatory work” the statement is immediately made: “All of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgement of the Church ...” (DV 12).

### “Wide-open access to Sacred Scripture” (DV 22)

With respect to the “progress” that marks the way of the Church “in her teaching, life and worship” (DV 8) through the times, *Dei Verbum* affirms: “For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Lk 2:19,51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth.” (DV 8).

An understanding of the Church’s tradition and identity is here sketched that mentions in the first place the faith experience of members of the People of God (the *sensus fidelium*) and the spiritual dimension of the working of the Holy Spirit and only in third place alludes to the Church’s official preaching. Such an understanding of tradition corresponds very well to the Council’s image of the Church as it is developed in *Lumen Gentium*, where it is the fundamental equality of all the baptized that is first mentioned, and only thereafter the special services and offices in the Church.



To this corresponds, with reference to the role of the Bible in the life of the Church, that its significance is valued by no means for the teaching office and for theology alone. Scripture is “the supreme rule of faith” (DV 21) and “easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful” (DV 22). “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 in 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” (DV 21). These formulations not only bring out the significance of the Bible for the life, faith and spirituality of believers, but they also invite the faithful to deal with the Bible in a



direct and immediate way. One could say that the conciliar statements place a Bible directly in the hands of every man and woman. In this connection, collaboration with “the divided brothers” (DV 22) and the preparation of Bible editions “for non-Christians” (DV 24) is explicitly mentioned. Neither a Roman Catholic nor a clerical claim to a monopoly on the Bible or its interpretation is made. “Suitable institutions”, e.g. Biblical Associations, “and other aids” (DV 25) should contribute to the spread of the Bible.

At the level of the dissemination and translation of the Bible, as well as of biblical spirituality and of biblical pastoral practice the conciliar Constitution makes more room for the strengthening of the mature and informed faith of all Christians, for ecumenical collaboration and for dialogue with other religions and world views. Since of the same Bible it is said that “the Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord” and that it is “the supreme rule of faith” (DV 21), it can be said: the immediate access of every human being to God through his Word, the ecumenical exchange with other confessions and the dialogue with affiliates of other religions and world views (*Weltanschauungen*) belong to the heart of what makes the Church the Church: that she listens to God’s Word with full reverence and preaches it with full confidence (DV 1).



“It is only through this listening to the Word of God that the Church is constituted, not through her offices and functions. These are to be understood as derived and subordinate, if important structural elements of ecclesial self-fulfillment. The Word of Scripture remains the highest norm and the enduring standard of the Church’s teaching.” (Hanjo Sauer, *Die Dogmatische Konstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung Dei Verbum*, in: Franz Xaver Bischof/Stephan Leimgruber [ed.], *Vierzig Jahre II. Vatikanum. Zur Wirkungsgeschichte der Konzilstexte*, Würzburg 2004, 232–251: 247)

Neither the people of Israel nor Moses knew at the time of the exit from Egypt exactly what it meant to listen to

the voice of the “I-am-there” and to dare the departure into freedom. And even forty years of desert wandering, with all its many experiences of the nearness of God and all its crises of faith were not sufficient to ground the people and its leaders so firmly in its trust in the “God with us” (DV 4) that they were then able to make their way forward through history without detours and false trails. Many years later, experiences such as that of the loss of the “Promised Land” and the exile, or events such as the death and resurrection of Jesus brought the Exodus experience once again into a new light and found expression in terms of an interpretation and actualization of that experience within the Bible.

In the light of this – comparable, of course, only in a limited way to the experience of the People of Israel with its original liberation experience – we can, indeed we should expect and hope also with reference to the interpretation and implementation of Vatican II and its Constitution on Divine Revelation that their significance will be further clarified in the course of the Church’s future journey.

(Transl.: L. Maluf) ■

Abbreviated version of an article published in the Journal *Bibel und Kirche* 60 (2005) of the Katholisches Bibelwerk Deutschland.