



# The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

## A Commentary\*

Joseph Ratzinger (1967)

There were three factors that came together to inspire a Constitution on Divine Revelation. The first was the new understanding of the phenomenon of Tradition, which, for a variety of reasons, had begun to develop already since the beginning of the previous century (...) The second concern that led to the Constitution can be seen in the theological problem, as that came to be seen ever more clearly through the application of the historical critical method to the interpretation of Holy Scripture (...) The third driving force behind the Constitution on Revelation is also the most positive of the three: it is to be seen in the Bible movement, which had been gaining strength since the turn of the century and which, in large segments of Catholic Christianity, had already fashioned a new fundamental attitude toward Holy Scripture, unleashed a new familiarity with it and an increasingly decisive reliance on Scripture in both theology and piety. As with the case of the liturgical movement, in the decades before the Council a new spiritual fact had become a reality in the Church, which the Council had only to pick up, to deepen and to extend to the whole Church (to the extent that it is within the power of a council to do so.) (...)



Joseph Ratzinger in the  
1960's

So it was that on November 18, 1965, in the eighth official session of the Council, the final vote could be taken, which looked as follows: 2350 votes, 2344 Placet, 6 Non placet. A decisive piece of conciliar history had thus found a conciliatory conclusion. The text, which was solemnly proclaimed by the Pope on this very day, naturally carries the traces of its belabored history: it is the result of many compromises. But the basic compromise which carries this text is more than a compromise; it is a synthesis of enormous significance: the text binds together loyalty to Church tradition with the yes to critical science, and thereby once again opens the way for faith into the world of today. It does not surrender the substance of Trent or Vatican I, but it also does not mummify the past either, because it knows that fidelity in spiritual matters can only be realized through a process of ongoing vital appropriation. Looking at what the Council achieved as a whole, it is fairly safe to say that the efforts of a struggle that lasted four years were not in vain. (...)

### Article 22

The challenge issued by *Dei Verbum* to open wide the gates to Holy Scripture for all the faithful is particularly weighty when seen against the background of history. The fences that had been erected with respect to the vernacular Bible and to Bible reading by non-theologians ever since the 13<sup>th</sup> and especially the 15<sup>th</sup> century are here decisively torn down. (...)

The following statements pick up again in the same spirit the decree of Trent on the Vulgate and alter it in a twofold way by setting it within a new, and this time truly ecumenical context:

a) Instead of the misleading statement that the Vulgate "is to be regarded as authentic", a simpler and clearer formulation is chosen, namely, that the Vulgate will always be held in honor by the Church. But this observation is now no longer made merely with respect to the classical Bible translation of the Latin West; rather it is extended to the great translations of the partial churches – Oriental as well as Latin – whereby particular account is taken of the weight the Septuagint possessed for the early Church and already for the the Greek New Testament and its Christian re-reading (*relecture*) of the Old Testament. In the formula "ut suam susceperit" ("the Church ... accepted [the Septuagint] as her own"), the fundamental process of the reception of the Bible of the old People of God and its form in the Bible of the Greek speaking Jews as the Holy Scripture of the new People of God is brought to explicit consciousness. Through this new context, the new ground for the ecclesial valuing of the Vulgate is now also expressed: it is the Bible of the Fathers, as translation inevitably also already a piece of interpretation, the way in which the old Church of the West read, understood and received the Bible. In this sense it is not only Scripture, but also a piece of ecclesial interpretation of the Bible, and "tradition". To declare it alone authentic would be to place tradition above Scripture. In contrast, to "hold it in honor" and at the same time to demand a return to the original text implies a new definition of the relationship of Scripture and Tradition, such that the step taken by Vatican II in this matter becomes clearer here in this concrete example than it is in the formal statement of principle found in chapter 2. Above all, however, it should also be noted that the fundamental ideas of the Constitution on the



Church and of the Decree on Ecumenism are worked out in a practical way here. The isolation and raising to effectively absolute status of the Latin Church is broken through and she is viewed once again in tandem with the non-Latin churches as the one and universal Church, such that one cannot speak of the Latin translation alone, but before it is even mentioned, similar observations must be made about the translations of the Eastern Churches. This broadening of horizons brought about by Vatican II over against Trent and Vatican I proves to be a not merely human, but genuinely theological phenomenon.

b) As I already indicated, at the same time that it honors the Tradition by acknowledging the enduring value of the ancient Christian translations of the Bible, the Council also mandates a return to the original texts. The mandate states that God's Word in Scripture is to be made accessible to people today through direct translation from these original texts into modern languages. The way in which a "return" here is intrinsically and at the same time also a way forward, and the unity in an original text that holds all together is at the same time an enabling of pluralism, should shed light on the fundamental structure of ecclesial reform: To go behind the classical translations to the original text means at the same time to translate anew and so stride forward; to reflect on a basic text means also to open the Bible to every modern language. The unity radius of the text has more to it than that: when on the Catholic and the Protestant sides people return to what lies behind the classical translations of their own traditions, to the source that binds all together, it will also be possible to have common translations, and with the translations a common reading and a common understanding. The encouragement to common translations with non-Catholic Christians is a challenge to a common re-reading of the Bible from out of our present Christian situation, to a common understanding of the Word of God that sustains all. If anything, it can become a starting point for a new common understanding of the message that sustains us all. This is actually an enormous advance over Trent, and the pragmatic statements of this conciliar text are themselves truly theological events of great significance. (...)

## Article 24

Article 24 is devoted to the function of Scripture for theology. This function is initially described with the image of a foundation, whereby the element of continuity stands in the foreground: Regardless of how much in a house can grow and develop, its foundation remains and is the stable presupposition without which the rest could have no sustained existence. (...) The static character of the image of a foundation is complemented in the second half of the sentence through the predicates "roboratur" ("strengthened") and "iuvenescit" ("rejuve-

nated"): the "house" of theology is not a building built once for all time, but it stands only if theology remains vibrantly engaged. And so the foundation is also the ever grounding and ever sustaining starting point for the durability of theology. For this reason Scripture, shifted to the organic level of imagery, is described as that which makes young, that which keeps theology strong and vibrant. (...)



In a third image, which goes back to Leo XIII, Scripture is finally described as the "soul of sacred theology". The expression receives here its far-reaching power through its connection with the Decree on Priestly Training, which employs the same expression (*S. Scriptura anima theologiae*), to draw from it a practical consequence, which for the formal system of Catholic theology would have to possess an almost revolutionary significance.

In the previously existing manuals of dogmatic theology the starting point of the respective treatment was the doctrinal scheme of the Church. Following this, a biblical proof and then one from the tradition were offered, and then an attempt at a theological argument or synthesis. The consequence of this approach was the fundamental fact that Scripture was treated only with a view to its probative value for existing statements of doctrine. Even where this treatment of Scripture was conducted with considerable care and with the use of modern exegetical methods, scholars never quite succeeded in developing a given topic out of the perspective of Scripture itself, nor were questions newly raised that emerged from the biblical text itself and that were not intended by the syllabus of ecclesial dogmatics. Where new questions were dealt with, they emerged generally out of the work of systematic theology itself, not from the impetus of Scripture. In the Decree on Priestly Training it is now said that dogmatic theology is to be so constructed "ut ipsa themata biblica primum proponantur" ("...that these biblical themes are proposed first of all", *Optatam totius* 16). This means that in the future the Bible is first to be read, reflected on and questioned in its own context, and only then the development of the tradition and dogmatic analysis will come into play. The consequences this new approach has for problems of method in Catholic theology have yet to be fully thought out. But it should not be difficult to see that the expression of Scripture as the soul of theology has enormous practical weight here.

The last sentence of our article subjects the homily and all forms of ecclesial preaching to the same law which we have just found applied to theology: that these ecclesial functions draw their inspiration from Scripture is their most urgent task. The unity of the conciliar work is also evident here: the demand for regular homilies made by



the Council in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (chapter 2, art. 52), is here picked up and expanded to include the requirement of a biblical orientation of the entire work of preaching. (...)

## Article 25

Article 25 draws some practical consequences from the new attitude to the original text, to translation and to accessibility to the Bible that was formulated in article 22. Bible reading is moved to the center of Christian existence and a new orientation is given to Catholic piety. Until now, the prayer life of Catholic Christians, apart from their participation in the liturgy, was primarily marked by various kinds of devotions – the rosary, the Stations of the Cross, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, etc. – which originated since the late medieval period and in the course of the modern era. Private reading of the Bible played no primary role here and even for meditation and preaching it was not of first rate significance. It may thus be seen as an event of far-ranging significance for the development of the spiritual life when our text highlights personal engagement with the Scripture as a fundamental form of a relationship with God and further underscores its importance by means of the emphatic statement of Saint Jerome: “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” It is important to see that the Council is not talking about a purely intellectual, informative knowledge of Scripture, or even one resulting from cultural and educational considerations. Rather, it speaks of a Bible reading as prayer, as the execution of that dialogue with the Lord, whose vibrant realization in faith and prayer the pages of Scripture as it were await. One might say that Catholic piety to a large extent has yet to properly discover the Bible and that such an event will in turn also be of great significance for exegesis, which can otherwise easily slip into a purely intellectual atmosphere, to which profound dimensions of this book must remain hidden, however much insight might be gained through the historical sciences.

The last section of our article extends what has thus far been said to the level of the Church’s missionary activity and thereby once again takes a novel step that will certainly be of some significance for the fundamental understanding of mission. What for a long time has been taking place on the Protestant side will now become the proper work of Catholic Christians and of the Catholic Church – namely, the dissemination of the Bible among non-Christians. A new element thus enters into the understanding of mission, which has thus far been defined in overly hierarchical and institutional terms: a trust in the self-operative power of the Word, which of course cannot and should not render the Church’s preaching superfluous, but that it can carry as a piece of the presence of Jesus Christ among the peoples, far beyond the realm of the hierarchical Church. Perhaps we

should learn to give a higher theological rating to the presence of Christ that comes to be in this way among those who are not baptized, and who to a large extent will probably remain un-baptized: In the last analysis, only the Lord himself can decide what it means when people in this way also manage to take hold as it were only of the hem of his garment as he passes by (cf. Mark 6:56). This would make tangible in an especially beautiful way that spirit of openness which more and more left its stamp on the Council. “It seems indisputable to me that the Church with this word has in a sense achieved the waiver of any claim to monopolize the Bible, to be its sole proprietor and legitimate reader. In this way she found a standard, in all simplicity, for the renewal that she introduced in the incredibly short time-span of three years.” (J.M. González Ruiz, *Der Gebrauch der Bibel in der Kirche des Konzils*, in: J.C. Hampe [ed.], *Die Autorität der Freiheit. Gegenwart des Konzils und Zukunft der Kirche im ökumenischen Disput*, München 1966, 232-239: 238)

Article 26 returns once again to the comparison with the Eucharistic mystery that stood at the beginning of our chapter: Word of God and Body of Christ, Word and sacrament belong together and are the two-in-one way in which the Logos become flesh remains with his Church and gives her life ... The universalistic ideas of the prooemium return here as well: “That the word of God may spread rapidly and be glorified.” (2 Thess 3:1) It is precisely the idea that comes immediately before these words, the readiness to generously and fearlessly scatter abroad the seed of the Word of God, even in those places where what grows from it is something we cannot supervise or control, that constitutes a full yes to the universal meaning and to the inner power of the Word of God, that does not return to Him empty (Is 55:10f). The Constitution that begins with the idea of universalism, ends with it as well: the Word of God is intended for men, and the ministry of the Word, which the Church seeks with this Constitution, can not be restricted to the matter of internal church reform. In the final analysis it is ordered to humanity as a whole, for it is not the Church as such but every individual human being that lives in the most profound sense from the Word of God more than from the bread that sustains him in an earthly life threatened by death.

(Transl.: L. Maluf) ■

\* Translation from German. Publication with kind permission of Verlag Herder, Freiburg i. Br., Germany. The original text has been published in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 13, Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1967).