

**“DEI VERBUM AUDIENS ET PROCLAMANS” – “HEARING THE WORD OF GOD
WITH REVERENCE AND PROCLAIMING IT WITH FAITH”
THE CONSTITUTION ON DIVINE REVELATION “DEI VERBUM”**

Cardinal Walter Kasper

I. A memorable beginning

The discussion of the Dogmatic Constitution in the Council Hall began with a clash of drums. The schema proposed by the Theological Preparatory Commission was rejected by a large majority during the very first session. But since this vote failed by a narrow margin to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority, Pope John XXIII was compelled to intervene. He did so in a manner which elicited from a Protestant observer the comment that he was beginning to believe in Papal infallibility. In fact the Pope did nothing more than what we always do when we do not know how to proceed: we establish a commission. That is exactly what John XXIII did. In order to find a way out of the impasse he constituted a joint commission under the chairmanship of the two Cardinals who were adversarially engaged in the dispute, Ottaviani and Bea.¹

In the course of this confrontation during the first session the Council arrived at a sense of self-assurance. When Pope Paul VI intervened once more at the end of the fourth session by making some amendments which would also enable the minority to give its assent, the Council had to recognise its limitations.

The clash of drums at the beginning of the Council has its counterpart in the tone of the content at the beginning of the text of the Constitution. There the Council circumscribes its own sense of itself and of the church. The Constitution begins with the words *Dei Verbum religiose audiens et fideliter proclamans*: “Hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with confidence”. It also affirms that the reverently heard and faithfully proclaimed word of God is a *praeconium salutis*, a message of salvation and a word of life.

The *Incipit*, i.e. the first words of a magisterial document normally indicates the overall thrust of the whole document. Therefore the introductory formulation cited above can be considered the interpretive key to the whole Constitution. And that is not all. With the aid of this introductory formulation the Council intended to sum up the entire being of the church “in the twofold gesture of hearing and proclaiming”. There can be no better expression than this of the “dominance of the word of God, its sovereign primacy over all the words and deeds of the people of the church”. While it could at times appear as though the Council was tending towards ecclesiological self-contemplation, revolving within its own orbit and becoming itself the central subject of its own proclamation, with this formulation “the whole existence of the church is as it were thrust upward [becomes as it were open to the transcendent], its whole being is encompassed in the gesture of hearing, from which alone its speaking can proceed”.² Here the church defines itself as the listening church, and only as a listening church can it be a proclaiming church.

The Council was not always able to sustain the high standard of this magnificent formulation throughout the rest of the text. In order to achieve the end result of a definitive text which was

¹ On the history of the Council in general and the Constitution “Dei Verbum” in particular: Storia del Concilio Vaticano II, ed. G. Alberigo, Vol. 1-4, Bologna 1995-99. A. Marchetto, Il concilio ecumenico Vaticano II, Città del Vaticano 2005. On the theological interpretation of Dei Verbum: E. Stakemeier, Die Konzilskonstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung, Paderborn 1966; J. Ratzinger, Kommentar zur Dogmatischen Konstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung, in: LThK Vat. II, Bd. 2 (1967), 498-543; 571-583; H. de Lubac, La révélation divine. Commentaire du préambule et du chapitre I de la Constitution „Dei Verbum“ du Concile Vatican II, Paris 1983 (Gn. Die göttliche Offenbarung. Kommentar zum Vorwort und zum ersten Kapitel der Dogmatischen Konstitution „Die Verbum“ des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils, Freiburg i. Br. 2001, 4158); O. H. Pesch, Das zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Vorgeschichte – Verlauf – Ergebnisse – Nachgeschichte, Würzburg 1993, 271-290.

² All citations from J. Ratzinger, Kommentar, 504

able to be passed with only six contrary votes, some compromises had to be entered into in many places, and elsewhere some questions had to be left open. But even if the Constitution had uttered only this one sentence, it would have been more than worthwhile. This first sentence alone makes it a fundamental document of the church's understanding of itself.

II. The burden of historical problems

The difficulties and tensions which were revealed during the recasting of the Constitution should not surprise us if one considers what problems had to be overcome, what historical burdens had to be cleared away, what was involved in the discussion, and what was at stake.

If we wish to do justice to the document and recognise its full significance, we need to refer back to the confrontations of the Reformation period. As early as in 1518 the dispute between Martin Luther and Cardinal Cajetan revolved around the competence of the teaching office in the interpretation of scripture.³ In one of Luther's major reformist writings of 1529, *De captivitate Babylonica* we find the now classic formulation of the church as *creatura verbi*.⁴ In 1537 Luther finally, at the height of the confrontation, formulated it thus in the Schmalkald articles: "The word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel".⁵ This statement was intended to be a challenge and a crushing critique. With the aid of the word of God reigning supreme over the church Luther wanted to – as he said – turn the papal church upside down.

With theses like these Luther opened up a debate which did not merely revolve around the reforms that were doubtless urgently needed at the time; nor was it in the least simply a matter of social and political conflict. As much as all these factors played a role, the theological issue was the fundamental understanding of the church in its relationship to the word of God. Cajetan saw that clearly already in Augsburg and confronted Luther with it: "I call that establishing a new church".⁶

The Fathers of the Council of Trent understood the challenge. They recognised the need for church reform and ushered in a comprehensive reform with their reform decrees. The deeper dimensions of the problem were expressed already in the fourth conciliar session with the *Decretum de libris sacris et de traditionibus recipiendis* of 1546. There the Council itself spoke of the "*puritas ipsa Evangelii*", but it went on to speak of the "*puritas ipsa Evangelii in Ecclesia*". The words "*in Ecclesia*" give expression to the definitive difference. Of this phrase "*Evangelium in Ecclesia*" the Council Fathers were able to claim that it was the *one source (fons)* (singular!) "*omnis et salutaris veritatis et morum disciplinae*" (of all saving truth and moral order) (*DH 1501*).

Standing behind the formula "*Evangelium in Ecclesia*" is not a crass claim by the teaching office of the church that it is able to administer the Gospel under its own direction; in the background we find instead a long tradition of pneumatologically determined ecclesiology. This can be traced back to the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians. There Paul defines the church in Corinth as a letter which has not been written with ink, and has not been carved in stone like the old covenant, but has instead been inscribed in the hearts of the faithful by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3,2f).

The great church father Irenaeus of Lyon took up this statement as early as the 2nd century, and thereby founded a long tradition.⁷ Thomas Aquinas also knew that the *lex evangelii* was not an

³ Cf. O. H. Pesch, *Hinführung zu Luther*, Mainz 1982, 107-109. Similarly Luther's declaration of 1521 before the Diet in Worms: WA 7, 838; Luther before the Diet of Worms, Luther's Works, American edition v. 32 p 112f.

⁴ WA 6, 561; *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther's Works v.36 p 107.

⁵ BSELK 421; *Schmalkald Articles* Article 2 part 15.

⁶ O. H. Pesch, *Hinführung*, 105.

⁷ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus haereses* III, 4, 2; cf. 24,1. Further texts in H. de Lubac, *Geist aus der Geschichte. Das Schriftverständnis des Origenes*, Einsiedeln 1968, 233-290.

external law and not a book but the “*gratia Spiritus Sancti, quae datur Christi fidelibus*”.⁸ At the Council of Trent this pneumatological conception was taken up by the Council President Cervini. He explained: The Gospel is not written *in charta* but *in cordibus* by the Holy Spirit.⁹

If one takes this pneumatologically based relationship between the Gospel and the church into account, the Council of Trent is far better than its general reputation. If one wants to do full justice to the Council, one must also take note of its unfortunately too little known disciplinary decrees, and recognize that the Council not only defended the teaching office and the sacraments against the Reformers but also made a vigorous attempt to promote preaching.¹⁰ The Constitution *Dei verbum* was able to refer back to this tradition, therefore it quoted extensively from the Trent decree on the scriptures and tradition, deepening and expanding on it. (DV 7).

This new approach was necessary because post-Tridentine theology had not maintained the high standards of the theology on which the Council of Trent was grounded. Instead it had developed the theory of the two sources (plural!) of scripture and tradition and claimed they were only the more remote sources of faith, while the nearest and most immediate source was the teaching office of the church. In the magisterium the Gospel was thought to be immediately present; the conviction prevailed that the teaching office in the final analysis was its own guarantor and quite self-sufficient. The holy scriptures were then more or less nothing more than a quarry for *a posteriori* proofs.¹¹ This unhistorical understanding of the Bible inevitably led to a second great debate which had to be fought out with historical Biblical criticism, which had steadily gained predominance in modern humanism and in the enlightenment. In the Catholic church this crisis only erupted at a very late stage in the modernism crisis at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.

The modernists (to be fair one should in many cases rather speak of so-called modernists) wanted to give historical thinking – which had become definitive for modern culture – the right to a place within the church and within theology, and make historical thinking useful and fruitful for the church. For all that the criticism was in individual instances quite justified, we do have to acknowledge that even Alfred Loisy, who was considered an arch-modernist, was motivated by an apologetic interest. Even the young Angelo Roncalli was influenced by Ernesto Buonaiuti who was suspected of being a modernist. Presumably one can see there at least one motive for his later program of “*aggiornamento*”.¹²

The confrontation with modernism revolved around questions regarding the historical foundation of the Bible, the inspiration and inerrancy of scripture, the relationship between historical criticism and the teaching office of the church, and the issue of the development of dogma. The often unpleasant debates led eventually, following the *Syllabus* (1864), the decree *Lamentabili* and the encyclical *Pascendi* (1907), the *Antimodernisteneid* [*The oath against Modernism*] (1910) and many other outdated position statements of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of the time, to unhelpful internal hardening and distortions within the church.

The ‘all-clear’ was not sounded until the Biblical encyclical of Pius XII *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943). Here for the first time the historical method was recognized, and attention to the literary genres was called for (DH 3825-31). The same tendency was evident in the encyclical *Humani generis* (1950) and various writings of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of 1948 and 1964 (DH 3862-64; 3866-89; 3999). These new position statements by the teaching office did not however

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III q. 106 a. 1. Thomas gives an unusually detailed biblical reasoning for this. Interesting too is his commentary on 2. Corinthians c. 3 *lectio* 2.

⁹ Cf. Concilium Tridentinum, ed. the Goerresgesellschaft, Vol. V, 11; see J. Ratzinger, Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriffs, in: K. Rahner – J. Ratzinger, Offenbarung und Überlieferung (QD 25), Freiburg i. Br. 1965, 50-69.

¹⁰ Cf. the *Decretum super lectione et praedicatione* of the 5th session, . In: *Conciliorum oecumenicorum Decreta*, ed. J. Alberigo et.al., Freiburg i. Br. 1962, 643-646.

¹¹ Cf. W. Kasper, Die Lehre von der Tradition in der Römischen Schule, Freiburg i. Br. 1962, 40-47; Y. Congar, Je crois en l'Esprit saint, Bd. 1, Paris 1979, 207-217 (Gn. Der Heilige Geist, Freiburg i. Br. 1982, 140-146).

¹² Cf. M. Benigni – G. Zanchi, Giovanni XXIII. Biografia ufficiale, Milano 2000, 68-70.

prevent bitter confrontations in the period immediately before and even during the Council.¹³ Thus it was inevitable that the debates in the Council Hall were conducted adversarially and then left their mark within the Constitution.

But in the period between the two World Wars the ecclesial situation had undergone a profound change. In the first half of the 20th century the Bible Movement, like the Liturgical Movement, had become a spiritual force within the church and could no longer be ignored. Bible circles, Bible studies and daily Bible reading revealed the pastoral and spiritual fruitfulness of the word of God in holy scripture. In addition the Bible Movement had become fundamental to the Ecumenical Movement which had emerged at the same time, and the promotion of ecumenism was one of the main concerns of the Council (*UR 1*).

On the basis of these developments within the church the Council was able to confront the issues of historical criticism in a new, positive and constructive spirit. This occurred above all in the acknowledgement of the Biblical authors as “genuine authors” (*DV 11*); on the question of the inerrancy of scripture the Council excluded purely scientific and other similar questions, and spoke of the truth which God intended to teach “for the sake of salvation” (*ibid*). The Council also urged attention to the original intention of the text as well as the literary genres of scripture and indirectly recognized modern form and redaction criticism of the Gospels (*DV 12*). In contrast to Trent’s preference for the Latin Vulgate (*DH 1508; cf 3006*) the use of the original text was given precedence (*DV 22*).¹⁴

By taking the historicity of the word of God in holy scripture seriously in this way, the Council was not in any sense making a concession to the spirit of the times but rather acknowledging the divine condescendence in history of the eternal wisdom of God which reached its apogee in the incarnation of the eternal Logos (*DV 13*).

The goal of highlighting the original historical and above all pastoral intention of the Biblical text gave rise to a third constellation of problems. The Trent Decree had affirmed that scripture and traditions are to be held fast “*pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia*” (*DH 1502*). This statement inevitably led to the question of how this affirmation could be reconciled with the particular significance of holy scripture.

The Tübingen theologian of dogmatics Josef Rupert Geiselmann addressed this question immediately before the Council. In the course of his studies on the developmental history of the Tridentine text he came to the surprising conclusion that the Council of Trent had not in fact determined that the one source of revelation was *partim-partim*, contained partly in scripture and partly in oral traditions. He demonstrated that the Council had dropped this “*partim-partim*” during the course of its discussions in order to replace it with the simple “*et*”, speaking merely of “Scripture and traditions”. According to Geiselmann’s thesis, the Council of Trent had thereby not decided the question of the relationship of the content of the two elements but had left it open. It was only in post-Tridentine theology and post-Tridentine catechisms that the “*et*” was interpreted in the sense of “*partim-partim*”.

According to Geiselmann another interpretation is also possible, according to which the one Gospel is contained entirely in scripture and entirely in the tradition. Tradition would thereby not be devalued but revalued: it is not an addendum to scripture but contains the whole Gospel in its own right; according to Catholic understanding it is accorded constitutive significance for the exegesis of scripture as *traditio interpretativa*.¹⁵ Therefore these theses have nothing to do with

¹³ A sensation was caused above all by the frontal attack by A. Romeo, L’enciclica „*Divino afflante Spiritu*“ e le „*opiones novae*“, in: *Divinitas* 4, 1960, 387-456, where he spoke of the “brume nordiche” which had gathered over otherwise sunny Rome.

¹⁴ On these questions see the commentary by A. Grillmeier, in: *LThK Vat. II, Bd. 2, Freiburg i. Br. 1967, 544-559.*

¹⁵ J. R. Geiselmann, *Das Konzil von Trient über das Verhältnis der Heiligen Schrift und der nicht geschriebenen Traditionen*, in: *Die mündliche Überlieferung*, ed. M. Schmaus, München 1957, 123-206; and *Die Heilige Schrift und die Tradition*, Freiburg i. Br 1962. See also an earlier similar thesis in E. Ortigues, *Écriture et Traditions apostoliques*, in: *RSR* 36, 1949, 271-299. The sharpest rebuttal came from H. Lennerz, *Scriptura sola?*, in: *Gregorianum* 40, 1959, 38-53. A balanced overview by J. Beumer, *Die mündliche Überlieferung als Glaubensquelle* (*Handbuch der*

the “*Sola scriptura*” of the Reformation in the sense in which this axiom is generally understood and in which even Luther did not mean it to be understood.¹⁶ Nevertheless Geiselmann only narrowly escaped severe condemnation by the teaching office for his interpretation at that time. His theses led to a bitter discussion on the self-sufficiency of scripture in regard to content which resonated powerfully in the Council Hall.

Fundamentally, Geiselmann arrived at the answer which the Second Vatican Council also arrived at after a good deal of debate. Like Trent, Vatican II also deliberately left open the question of sufficiency of content.¹⁷ According to the Council scripture and tradition do not exist alongside one another as far as content is concerned but are intimately interwoven with and within one another (*DV 10*). Tradition is assigned an indispensable function of interpretation and above all of ascertainment in regard to scripture. In this sense the Council states that the church draws its certainty regarding all that which has been revealed not from scripture alone (*DV 9*).

Subsequently the criticism was made that Geiselmann had posed the wrong question and thus steered the discussion in the wrong direction because he had not taken into consideration the pneumatological concept of tradition on which the Council of Trent was grounded.¹⁸ As far as that is concerned he may well have in fact remained captive to post-Tridentine theology. But it is to his credit that he cleared the path for a way to be found out of this impasse, and for a foundation to be laid for a more comprehensive theology of the word of God.

III. Approaches to a theology of the word of God

In *Dei Verbum* the Council honestly confronted the questions which had been suppressed for too long; it took up the ecumenical issue once more, eased the tension in the relationship between historical and ecclesial interpretation of scripture and attained the right of domicile for historical interpretation within the church. No doubt much was left open in all of these questions, and compromises were entered into. Nevertheless we should not speak of an unsatisfactory, unbalanced and contradictory text.¹⁹ It would indeed be false to measure the significance of *Dei verbum* according to internal theological questions. It can not be the duty of any Council to answer all the questions which theologians would like to have answered, or answered according to their own way of thinking.

The opening sentence of the Constitution makes it clear that the Council is concerned with much deeper and more comprehensive questions than those which are in dispute between theologians and which must be debated within that arena. The Council is concerned with the essence and significance of the word of God understood as *praeconium salutatis*, a message of salvation and of life. With this formulation the Council refers back to the first Epistle of John: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the word of life” (*1John 1,1*).

It is striking that this quotation not only speaks of hearing but also of seeing and touching, and that means revelation not only through words but also through deeds. According to the Council too, God’s word issues forth in word and deed, which reciprocally interpret one another (*DV 2*).²⁰ God’s speaking is creative and therefore also always action. “*Dicere Dei est facere*” says Thomas Aquinas.²¹ There he expresses exactly the original meaning of the Hebraic word *dabar*, which can mean both word and deed. The theology of the church fathers as well as the theology of the early and the high Middle Ages therefore knew that revelation occurs as part of the

Dogmengeschichte I/4) Freiburg i. Br. 1962. Developed further above all by Y. Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions*, I: Essai historique, Paris 1960; II: Essai théologique, Paris 1963 (Gn. *Die Tradition und die Traditionen*, Bd. 1, Mainz 1965).

¹⁶ G. Ebeling, „*Sola scriptura*“ und das Problem der Tradition, in: *Wort Gottes und Tradition*, Göttingen 1964, 91-143.

¹⁷ Cf. the *Relatio* by Archbishop H. Florit on 25. 9. 1964, partially reproduced in: J. Ch. Hampe, *Die Autorität der Freiheit*, Bd. 1, München 1967, 122-126.

¹⁸ See J. Ratzinger, *Kommentar*, 499.

¹⁹ In this sense, O.H. Pesch, *Das zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, 286-290.

²⁰ See the commentary of H. de Lubac, *op. cit.* 62-91.

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Super II ad Corinthios c. 1 lectio 2 nrr.1*.

history of salvation.²² Only later was the history of salvation transported into an abstract doctrinal system or reduced to a personalistic and existential interpretation.

During the Council it was above all two Protestant theologians Kristen E. Skydsgaard and Oscar Cullmann who emphatically highlighted this salvatory character and found a hearing above all from Pope Paul VI. Revelation is neither an unhistorical myth nor an abstract speculation, it takes place within history, which reaches its completion and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ (*DV* 2; 4; 7; 13).

This Christological intensification and concentration of course also makes clear another deeper dimension. Through word and deed God does not reveal something; he reveals himself. Referring to Eph. 1, 9 and other Bible passages (*Col* 1,26; *1 Tim.* 3, 16) the Council speaks of a "*seipsum revelare et notum facere sacramentum voluntatis suae*" ("to reveal himself and proclaim the mystery of his will"). With this statement the Council achieved a breakthrough from an understanding based on instruction theory – as Max Seckler defines it – to an understanding based on communication theory.²³ That means: the word of God is not intended as instruction on some supernatural facts or doctrines to which mankind has no access through the intellect alone; it is instead a communicative process from person to person. In His revelation God speaks to us as friends out of the abundance of His love (*DV* 2) (*cf. Ex.* 33,11; *John* 15,14f).

The consequence of the personal understanding of revelation is the personal understanding of faith. Speaking of the "obedience of faith" (Rom 16,26) which mankind renders to the self-revealing God, the Council says: "Thereby man entrusts his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him" (*DV* 5). Ultimately faith relates neither to the heard word nor to the experience of the salvation event but solely to God who reveals Himself in word and deed.

Thomas Aquinas correctly comprehended this fundamental structure of faith. According to him the formal object of faith is God as the *prima veritas*, the material object too is God, and everything else insofar as it has a reference to God.²⁴ That excludes the idolisation of the word as well as of individual so-called facts of salvation. They have only a mediating significance – theologically speaking a sacramental-symbolic significance – in faith. In this sense faith does not exclude but rather includes concrete content, also doctrinal content. The Constitution wishes to hold fast to both aspects, although it must also be admitted that it did not succeed entirely in mediating the two aspects.²⁵

In essence the process of revelation is a dialogic communication process. Communication both becomes and effects participation. The word of God wants to cause that which it says to become present reality. It is an efficacious word (*verbum efficax*) which also effects and grants that which it says (*Heb* 4,12). Ultimately it does not give us "something", it gives us access to the Father (*Eph* 2,18) and allows us to participate in the divine nature (*2 Pet* 1,4). That expresses the intention of the revelation process, quoting the 1st Epistle of John: "In order that you also may have fellowship with us, and that our fellowship may be with the Father, and with his son Jesus Christ" (*1John* 1,3). The word of God as *praeconium salutatis* is therefore the message of communion, *communio* with God and with one another. As such it is the word of life (*DV* 1).

This message of salvation is directed at the whole world. Therefore the preface of *Dei Verbum* defines the aim of the whole document by quoting Augustine: "so that by hearing the message

²² Augustine, *De vera religione* VII,13 speaks of the "historia e prophetia dispensationis temporalis divinae providentiae pro salutis generis humani in aeternam vitam reformandi eatque reparandi."

²³ M. Seckler, *Der Begriff der Offenbarung*, in: *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie*, ed. W. Kern et. al., Bd. 2, Freiburg i. Br. 1985, 64-67.

²⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II/II q. 1 a. 1.

²⁵ J. Ratzinger rightly criticises this in his *Commentary*, 505. Important reflections on the relationship of act and content of the *doctrina* are found in Thomas Aquinas. Cf. Y. Congar, „*Traditio*“ und „*Sacra doctrina*“ bei Thomas von Aquin, in: *Kirche und Überlieferung* (FS Geiselmann), ed. J. Betz and H. Fries, Freiburg i. Br. 1960, 170-210.

of salvation the whole world may believe; by believing it may hope; and by hoping it may love” (DV 1).²⁶ This universal goal orientation is taken up again later in the text, where the Constitution speaks of revelation in creation, and referring back to the 1st Vatican Council speaks of the possibility of acknowledging God by the natural light of reason through created realities (Rom 1,20) (DV 3,6). It is however indicative that the Second Vatican Council thereby clearly goes further than the First Vatican Council, in that it does not simply see creation as the natural order, but categorises it christologically. It speaks of the fact that God has created all things through the word (John 1,3), thus relating creation also to Christ and in Christ (1Cor 8,6; Col 1,16f; Heb 1,2).²⁷

Unfortunately the consequences of this important idea are not developed further in *Dei Verbum*. It was the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* which succeeded in demonstrating that from Jesus Christ and his word light falls on the whole of reality, it is through Christ that the ultimate vocation of mankind, the meaning of his life, but also the riddle of pain and death is illuminated (GS 10; 22; 32; 45 et al). In a felicitous formulation the pastoral constitution says that God in his word not only reveals Himself but also “man to man himself” (GS 22). In this sense the theological explanation of the word of God as the word of life and as *praeconium salutatis* must also always be a an existential interpretation and an interpretation of worldly reality, in which we and our world and our life must be at stake, naturally in such a way that eternal life and complete communion with God are not lost from view but remain fixed before our eyes as the true goal of mankind.²⁸

The word of God was poured out only once in history, once and for all time; it reached its fulfillment in Christ Jesus. Now as the Gospel it must be passed on to all peoples through the apostles and their successors, the bishops. Even though apostolic preaching has been expressed with particular clarity in holy scripture (DV 8) it is not intended to be understood as a book but as *viva vox evangelii*, which Luther was not the first to describe as “a sermon and a report concerning the grace and mercy of God”.²⁹ The Scriptural commentaries of Thomas Aquinas point in the same direction.³⁰ This transmission is accomplished, in a similar manner to revelation itself, by means of oral preaching, by example and by ordinances (DV 7). So we have the transmission not only of words but also of realities. The Council combines the two in the sentence: “So the church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes (DV 8).

This understanding of tradition has evoked harsh criticism from Protestant theologians. They have seen in it the deification of tradition and the church, which they feel compelled to protest against in the sharpest terms.³¹ The sentence just quoted would indeed be inadmissible if it were to equate the church as it actually exists, and the whole concrete life of the church, with the Gospel. That would be presumptuous, for there is no doubt that there is much within the church which does not conform with the gospel but clearly contradicts it. The Council wanted to preclude this misunderstanding and therefore spoke not only of what the church is but of what it believes. One can of course only understand the cited sentence if one understands it against the pneumatological background which shines through the whole second chapter of the Constitution.

²⁶ Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus*, 4,8.

²⁷ The foundation of this thought is already laid in Jewish theology, according to which the world is created according to the dimensions of the Torah. Cf. C. Thoma, *Das Messiasprojekt. Theologie jüdisch-christlicher Begegnung*, Augsburg 1994, 72-74.

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *S. th. II/II q. 1 a 6* with reference to Heb 11,1: “fides principaliter est de his quae videnda speramus in patria.”

²⁹ Martin Luther, WA 12,259; Sermon on the First Epistle of St Peter, Luther’s Works vol. 30 p 3. Cf. P. Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*, Gütersloh 1962, 71 f.

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Romanos*, c. 1, *lectio* 1 defines the *evangelium* as *bona annuntiatio*, whereby the pre-eminent good is Christ; Thomas also stresses the the salvatory significance of the gospel. (*lectio* 6). Cf. also *Super Galatas*, c. 1, *lectio* 2.

³¹ See K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2*, 622-640 and many other Protestant theologians.

God's communication of Himself as constant presence within history takes place, according to the testimony of scripture, in the Holy Spirit. Through Him the word of God has been inscribed in the hearts of mankind (2 Cor 3,2f); God's Spirit constantly reminds us anew of the word of God which has been imparted once and for all, but at the same time leads us deeper and deeper into all truth (John 16,13). Tradition is thus the perpetual and constantly new presence of God's word in the church through the Holy Spirit. Therefore it can be understood in the tradition of the Eastern Church as the epiclesis of the history of salvation.³²

Through the Holy Spirit who was promised to the church, the word of God – imparted once and for all – constantly addresses us anew in the church and becomes a constantly new event. In the words of the Council: "Thus God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the bride of His beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the gospel resounds in the church, and through her in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them (cf. Col 3,16)" (DV8). This statement makes it clear that an identification of the word of God with the word and life of the church is in no way intended. The church can not administer the word of God or take charge of it. Only as the church which hears what the Spirit has to say to the congregations (Rev 2,7 p), can it be a proclaiming church.

Correspondingly the Council says of the magisterium: "This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit; it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed" (DV10).

Unfortunately the Council neglected to develop the critical function of the word of God in concrete terms; it merely mentioned it almost casually and quite timidly, by describing scripture as a mirror in which the church already now sees the hidden God (DV7), in which she also – one could add – can and must always look at itself critically. But in the Council text we find no concrete criteria for discerning when God's word is heard in the church or when it is only a human, and under some circumstances even an ungodly, word. Joseph Ratzinger rightly emphasized that the Council thereby let slip an ecumenical opportunity.³³ As we will see, the Constitution does however at least suggest in which direction the answer is to be found, in the final section with its pastoral and spiritual orientation.

IV. Pastoral, spiritual and ecumenical significance of the *Lectio divina*

The course set by *Dei Verbum* has borne many good fruits since the Council. It enabled a new departure in exegesis which has proved very fertile for the whole of theology and has been of inestimable value for the ecumenical dialogue; without the renewal of Biblical theology, post-conciliar ecumenical dialogue would have been simply unthinkable. Since the Council the theology of the word of God has been powerfully transformed.³⁴ Here Catholic theology has also learned much from the great blueprints of 20th century Protestant theology.³⁵ The pastoral and spiritual significance of the Constitution has been at least as significant. This is discussed in the sixth chapter, on "Sacred scripture in the life of the church".

This chapter is not a simple pious addendum but really the climax of the whole Constitution. It begins with the fundamental statement: "The Church has always venerated the divine scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially

³² Thus the intervention of N. Edelby in the Council Hall, in: J. Ch. Hampe, op.cit. 119-122.

³³ J. Ratzinger, Kommentar, 519-523.

³⁴ H. U. von Balthasar, *Verbum caro*, Einsiedeln 1960; O. Semmelroth, *Wirkendes Wort*, Freiburg i. Br. 1962; L. Scheffczyk, *Von der Heilsmacht des Wortes*, München 1966; K. H. Menke, Art. Wort Gottes. III, in: LThK X, 2001, 1301f.

³⁵ K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Bd. I/1 and I/2, Zollikon-Zürich 1955. 1960; G. Ebeling, *Wort Gottes und Hermeneutik*, in: *Wort und Glaube*, Bd.1, Tübingen 1960, 319-348; E. Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt*, Tübingen 1977, 307-543; W. Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie*, Bd. 1, Göttingen 1988, 251-281.

in the sacred liturgy" (*DV 21*). That is the ancient tradition of the Fathers which reaches as far as Thomas a Kempis.³⁶ The Fathers go as far as defining the scripture as incarnation of the Logos.³⁷ According to them the church draws life from the scripture as from the eucharist. Both are the body of Christ and the nourishment of the soul; both combine to form one single mysterium.³⁸ Both together build up the church, which is in turn the body of Christ.³⁹

Correspondingly the Council, following on from the Biblical encyclicals of Popes Leo XIII (1893), Benedict XV (1920) and Pius XII (1943), emphasizes the particular significance of holy scripture, which in contrast to tradition, is the inspired word of God (*DV 8*). It determines that all proclamation of the church must be nourished by and oriented towards holy scripture (*DV 21; cf. 24*) and that easy access to scripture must be available to all the faithful (*DV 22*). It stresses the need for usable translations which should be primarily oriented toward the original text and wherever possible produced in ecumenical collaboration (*DV 22*). It considers scripture "as it were the soul of sacred theology" (*DV 24*). It cites the church father Hieronymus: "For ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ" (*DV 25*).

The Council drew practical consequences from this. It urged the faithful in general to read the scriptures (*DV 25*), as well as priests (*PO 13; 18*), candidates for the priesthood (*OT 16*), the religious (*PC 6*), and the laity (*AA 32*). The esteem accorded to holy scripture was of special significance for liturgical renewal (*SC 24; cf. 21; 51, 90; 92*), and even for church music (*SC 112; 121*). These statements brought about a profound change and a positive re-shaping of the spiritual life and the practice of piety in the church. In a word: the Constitution proved to be spiritually fruitful.

Unfortunately, the light is interspersed with shadows. Often the explanation of scripture is taught so one-dimensionally, and has become so complicated and spiritually infertile, that it has once more become a fence around the Bible for ordinary believers, blocking their access to it rather than simplifying it. Many commentaries speak more of the intentions of the Biblical authors and the various levels of the text than of God's message to us; God's word has been replaced by many human words and theses. That has led to a disintegration of the Bible and to a loss of the inner unity of the canon. Fortunately a critical revision of modern Bible criticism has begun, with a tendency to revert to a theological rather than an anthropological perspective.⁴⁰

In practical Bible study, methods of a more associative nature have become prevalent, which take their cue from subjective notions rather than objective understanding of the text and therefore tend to arrive at short-circuited actualizations. In many psychological explanations, exegetically peripheral aspects at times come to the fore while the actual intention of the text is overlooked. In the course of the – as such legitimate – confrontation of the text with contemporary experience, the latter is sometimes given more weight in the explanation and in part also for the critique of the text than the text is given for the critical interpretation of our experiences. Often the awareness is lost that in the Bible we are dealing with God's word and God's reality.

Therefore it seems to me that the most important practical consequence of *Dei Verbum* is the renewal of the Biblical and patristic tradition of *Lectio divina*.⁴¹ That means the private or shared spiritual reading of holy scripture, accompanied by prayer; therein – says the Council – God approaches us in love and enters into conversation with us (*DV 25*); there Jesus Christ himself is present (*SC 7*).

³⁶ Cf. J. Ratzinger, Kommentar, 572 Note 1; Thomas a Kempis, *De imitatione Christi* IV, 11, 21 f.

³⁷ Found already in Ignatius of Antioch, Philadelph. 5,1; further references particularly by Origenes in H. de Lubac, *Geist aus der Geschichte*, 401-404; also Hieronymus, In Psalm 147, 14,4; 80,3.

³⁸ H. de Lubac, *ibid.* 415 f.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 427. Concisely expressed by Thomas Aquinas: The church is constituted "*per fidem et fidei sacramenta*" (S. th. III q. 64, a. 2 ad 3).

⁴⁰ U. Wilckens, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Bd.1/1, Neukirchen 2002, 15-20; 59-119.

⁴¹ On the biblical and patristic roots: Article. *Lectio divina*, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, IX, 470-496; above all the now classic introduction by E. Bianchi, *Pregare la parola*. Introduzione alla "*Lectio divina*", Milano 1973 (Gn. Gott im Wort. Die geistliche Schriftlesung, Eichstätt 1997).

Spiritual reading goes back to the tradition of Jewish worship in the synagogue and to Old and New Testament tradition (*Neh 8,1-8; Luke 4,15-21; Acts 13,14f.;15,21*). In the church it corresponds to a tradition which reaches from the fathers to the high Middle Ages; in the Christendom of the Reformation it was held in high regard by Pietism in particular. Henri de Lubac has opened up this rich tradition for us anew.⁴² Renewing it is an important pastoral task. Within scripture Mary is regarded as the exemplary embodiment of such spiritual listening to the word of God. She is wholly the listener to the word sent to her (*Luke 1,38*). She accepts it in faith and is called blessed because of her belief (*Luke 1,45*). She keeps and ponders everything that she has heard and seen in her heart (*Luke 2,19, 51*).

Spiritual reading is of course not a panacea which will solve all problems at one stroke. It does not dispense us from the effort of exegesis. The Second Epistle of Peter already speaks of the effort of interpreting scripture. At the same time it warned explicitly against the unauthorized interpretation of scripture (*2 Pet 1,21*). The Bible was written for congregations; it was read in the assembled congregation and exchanged with other congregations; and the canon of holy scripture originated in the course of this complex reception process. Therefore *Dei Verbum* rightly emphasizes that holy scripture as the book of the church is to be read and interpreted in the spirit of the church (*DV 12; cf. DH 1507; 3007*).

The word of God belongs to all; therefore it must be interpreted with the consensus of all.⁴³ In listening to scripture it is essential to listen to all those who also endeavour to interpret it; it is essential to listen synchronically to what the others around us and diachronically to what others before us have heard. The correct exegesis of the word of God can only result from an open collaboration in which all – but in a different way – play their part: the testimony of the office of the church as well as the testimony of the laity and the theologians, the testimony of the saints and of the common people, not least the testimony of the liturgy, but also of church art and also the external prophecy of the world. The point is a catholic – in the original sense of that word – listening to God's word.⁴⁴

The ecumenical; significance of spiritual reading and interpretation of scripture while synchronically and diachronically listening to all others cannot easily be overvalued. In reading and contemplating the original document of our shared belief, our shared heritage and the heritage of the others are brought into play and into discussion. It tells us not only what we already share in faith and what we can do together; it also tells us what we can do to allow the already existing but still partial ecclesial communion to ripen into full ecclesial communion.

For if it is true that through His word God gathers the church from the four winds, and that God's word cannot be without God's people,⁴⁵ then today too God gathers His people in ecumenically shared *Lectio divina*. In the *Lectio divina* the ecumenically already existing yet incomplete unity becomes reality and at the same time prepares the way for unity. Ecumenical dialogue makes progress to the degree that it makes room for the dialogue of God with divided Christendom in shared spiritual study of the word of God. Spiritual scripture reading and scriptural exegesis is the answer to the ecumenical as well as the exegetical malaise.⁴⁶

⁴² H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale. Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, Paris 1959-64 and *L'Écriture dans la tradition*, Paris 1966 (German selections in: *Typologie, Allegorie, geistlicher Sinn, Einsiedeln* 1999); *Historie et Esprit* Paris 1950 (Gn. Geist aus der Geschichte, Einsiedeln 1968).

⁴³ The doctrine of the *consensus fidelium* "from the bishops to the last believing layperson" (*LG 12*) has its place here. Partial aspects are the doctrine of *consensus patrum* (*DH 1507*) and of *consensus theologorum*, which can of course not be established by the mechanical gathering of citations but only by the spiritual capacity of discernment.

⁴⁴ M. Seckler, *Die ekklesiologische Bedeutung des Systems der 'loci theologici'*. Erkenntnistheoretische Katholizität und strukturelle Weisheit, in: *Die schiefen Wände des Lehrhauses*, Freiburg i. Br. 1988, 79-104.

⁴⁵ Martin Luther, *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen* (1539), in: *WA 50*, 629. *On the Councils and the Church*, in *Luther's Works* vol 41 p 150.

⁴⁶ See Yves Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église*, Paris 1950; Groupe de Dombes, *Pour la conversion des Églises*, Paris 1991 (Gn. Für die Umkehr der Kirchen. Identität und Wandel im Vollzug der Kirchengemeinschaft, Frankfurt a.M. 1994).

With the renewal of the *Lectio divina* the Council did – without expressly taking it into account – at least point in the direction in which the answer to the then unanswered question of the critical function of scripture can be found. For in spiritual reading the word of God in scripture again and again approaches us anew, critically admonishing as well as positively encouraging; here the church holds up the mirror to itself again and again. To sum up in one sentence we can say: In spiritual reading the word of God *in* the church confronts the church. In it the word of God can again and again call us to repentance and renewal, and thus it exercises its critical function in the *ecclesia semper purificando* (LG 8).

To sum up in conclusion, what takes place in *Lectio divina* is precisely that which the introductory words of *Dei Verbum* expressed programmatically: in spiritual reading the “*Verbum Dei religiose audiens*” occurs; it calls to repentance and renewal; just so and only so it empowers the church to “*fideliter proclamans*”, to a faithful and yet ever new proclamation, to “*praeconium salutatis*”, to a witness responding to the needs of the times, thereby offering witness to the Word of God for the life of the world.