



## **Making Sense of *Dei Verbum* : Moslem Reflections on The Relation Between Scripture and Tradition**

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### **Abstract**

Like all great religions of the world, Christianity is a religion steeped in revelation. It tries to convince its followers that it was through the process of revelation that God made Himself known both in the Old and New Testaments, climaxing in the saving action of Jesus Christ. Although this is the starting point of Christian revelation, it would surprise many to know that it was only in the last five centuries that Christians started debating the issue and nature of revelation. In the present article, we shall critically examine how Catholic Christians started perceiving the notion of revelation from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) as enshrined in the Constitution *Dei Verbum* of the Council and the issues that keep Catholics engaged with regard to it with particular focus upon the relation between Scripture and Tradition and the ensuing tensions.

### **Keywords**

Revelation, Scripture, *Dei Verbum*, Tradition, Scripture, Holy Spirit.

### **The term ‘Revelation’**

Reading what Christian theologians have written on revelation over the last few years, one is bound to claim that it seems to be a major point of discourse in the Holy Bible. The truth however, is that it is a rarely used word in the Bible. Even in the New Testament, it is more frequently equated with the events at the end of time than anything else. For instance, (1 Corinthians, 1.7f) (2 Thessalonians, 1.7) (Titus, 2.13) (Heb, 9. 28).

The term ‘revelation’ comes from the Latin *revelare* meaning “to take away the veil” or to bring into view something that was earlier out of sight. This ‘bringing into view’ might be partial or complete. Needless to say, when Christians, Catholics in our case, talk about revelation, they mean the partial revelation of God, for the Bible has unequivocally decided that “No one has ever seen God” (John 1,18).

### **The Catholic view of Revelation: A bird’s eye view**

Catholics define revelation as the self-disclosure of God. (Grath at all., 1981, 3). The most significant text of the Bible upon which rests the whole edifice of Catholic as well as Christian revelation is:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. (Hebrews 1,1-3)

The first few words sum up the totality of revelation in the Old Testament with all its themes. The verse then goes on to add that this time around, God has decided to speak through His son Jesus who ought to be considered the fullness of revelation.

Theologically, God unveils and therefore reveals Himself for man through two modes as far as Catholics are concerned. The first mode is when God reveals Himself through nature. The Holy Bible is replete with verses which attempt to draw the attention of man to the universe around him and through it arrive at the truth that there is a God who has brought everything to life (Romans 1, 20).

To arrive thus at God is called natural revelation. Every human being who bears a sound mind and desires to attain God can do so through natural revelation, albeit, not fully. St. Thomas Aquinas tried to prove how God could be known through his famous “five ways” (Aquinas

1989, 12-14) using Aristotelian logic. His basic thesis is that one arrives at the knowledge of God through the light of reason. He then adds that there were two kinds of revelation: one the natural or rational type while the other the historic or special one. The first was ‘an ascent by the natural light of reason, through created things to the knowledge of God’ and the other was ‘a descent, by mode of revelation, of divine truth which exceeds human intellect, yet not as demonstrated to our sight but as a communication delivered for our belief’. The first kind he further elaborated:

Our natural knowledge takes its beginning from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can reach as far as it can be led by things of sense. But, starting from sensible things, our intellect cannot reach so far as to see the divine essence; because sensible things, which are created by God, are not equal to the power of God which is their Cause. Hence from the knowledge of sensible things the whole power of God cannot be known; from which it follows that His essence cannot be seen. But because they are His effects and dependent on Him as their Cause, we can be led from them so far as to know that God exists, and to know concerning Him those things which must necessarily appertain to Him in virtue of His being the first Cause of all things, exceeding all that He has caused. (Aquinas IV, I).

Man, in spite of his intelligence and in spite of the fact that he might be trying to seek God, may not reach Him. St Paul in the book of Wisdom creates room for such men:

Yet these men are little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him. For as they live among his works they keep searching (13.6f).

The second form of revelation is ‘supernatural revelation’. This happens when God manifests Himself to man without any effort on the part of man. This revelation is made mainly through prophets, apostles and sacred writers, more particularly so through his divine son.

It is supernatural because its truth is not part of our nature nor can it be attained by the unaided powers of our body and spirit. The response to this sort of revelation is faith. Unless otherwise stated, when revelation is mentioned through the course of this article, it would generally mean revelation in its second form. Needless to say, a supernatural revelation can only be made through supernatural means and for supernatural ends. The supernatural end which a Catholic aspires for is undoubtedly the Beatific Vision, namely, beholding God face to face. (1 Corinthians, 13:12 and 1 John, 3:2). (Herder 1904, 3)

If one takes a look at the Synoptic Gospels, it becomes clear that the main theme of Jesus' message was the kingdom of God and that he had come to fulfill the Law and the prophets.

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them...For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5, 17-20)

Similarly, in the apostolic letters, Christ's theological status is enhanced as he is said to have been revealed for the sake of people in the last days (1 Peter 1:20). He has come to 'put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (Hebrew 9, 26). God's grace has become manifest through Christ (2 Timothy 1:10). Christ would eventually be revealed more clearly at the Parousia (2 Thessalonians 1:7) (Gratsch et al. 1981, 9).

The Gospel of John is perhaps the most emphatic in declaring Christ God Himself (John 1:1-17) adding in plain language that he who sees Christ sees God (the Father) because the Father is in Christ and the Christ in Him (John 14:8-11).

This was more or less the view regarding revelation in Catholic thought prior to the Second Vatican Council. In the lines to follow, we shall study the document *Dei Verbum* (Latin for 'Word of God') and the issues it raises regarding revelation and then go on to discuss the thorny

relationship between Scripture and Tradition.

### **Outline of the Document *Dei Verbum***

The document *Dei Verbum* in its final shape consists of a Preface introducing the theme of revelation and 6 chapters (sections) of varying lengths comprising of 26 articles or clauses. While the first five are of a more or less doctrinal nature, the last one hovers around how the document is pastorally molded.

#### *Preface*

The document derives its name from the first Latin words of the text, namely, *Dei Verbum* (Word of God). The preface, article one of the documents is relatively short but four points of interest are immediately apparent:

1. The opening phrase of the Preface ‘Hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith’ was added in the final text, i.e. Text G. It clearly depicted the direction that the Church was going to take. Instead of cocooning itself around itself, it was going to act as a vehicle for proclaiming the word of God to the world thus living up to the dreams of Pope John XXIII.
2. The document takes its cue from the following statement of John in his first letter:

[We] proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1: 2-3).

Strangely, Ronald D. Witherup in his *Scripture: Dei Verbum* has claimed that the preface makes ‘explicit mention’ of the trinity, i.e. the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit by quoting this verse, yet that does not seem to be the case (Jersey 2006, 33). Undoubtedly trinity

stands at the foundation of the Christian belief, yet the verse only mentions the Father and the Son.

3. The document is also a continuation of the teachings of the two previous councils hence the words “following in the footsteps of the Council of Trent and of the First Vatican Council” (Paul VI 1965, 1). In this way, the historical continuation of this particular council and its documents is solicited as well as the fact that Vatican II is an authentication of the previous two councils while the previous two councils are to be understood and elaborated on the basis of the teachings of Vatican II. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger points out, this was probably done to appease the ‘conservative’ camp which would have wanted to see this document as reflecting its desire to protect traditional doctrine. This also suggests perhaps to the relief of the ‘liberal’ camp ‘the relation of this text to its predecessors [was] a perfect example of dogmatic development...’ (Herder and Herder 1969, 169), an accursed idea to the conservatives.
4. The preface ends on a pastoral note, the hallmark of John XXIII’s papacy. The three cornerstones of Catholic revelation are faith, hope and love each of which is respectively dependent upon the previous. Thus, it is through faith that one is hopeful of salvation and the fellowship of the Father and the Son. Once this hope is strongly instilled in one’s conscience, he/she is moved to carry this message of salvation and fellowship to others in love of them and their respective salvation. Needless to say, the whole concept of revelation in Christianity, much like with all great religious traditions, is very closely tied to the concept of salvation.

### *Chapter 1: Revelation Itself*

The first chapter proceeds through articles 2-6. Its main focus is the importance and need of revelation and its nature. It also gives a brief

history of the progression of salvation through history. The following are some of the more significant issues involved in this section of the document. I need to clarify that I am not going to proceed in the same order as the document does. Personally I find the arrangement of ideas and paragraphs slightly incoherent. The chronology of this section seems to be the nature of revelation, its historical progression through history, what it means in Christianity and finally its need and significance. I would have started with defining revelation, its need and significance and then gone to expound its nature in Catholic thought interspersed with its historical progression.

However that might be, revelation is when “the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself” (*Dei Verbum*). This fellowship is required because man has fallen into disgrace after eating from the forbidden tree. In this state of fallenness and disgrace, it is not easy for man to know his lord once again. Although, man with the power of his reason has the ability to recognize God and his designs with certainty, and hence one would venture to question the need for revelation, it is through revelation alone that “those religious truths which are by their nature accessible to human reason can be known by all men with ease, with solid certitude and with no trace of error, even in this present state of the human race”. (*Dei Verbum*). It was also “through divine revelation [that] God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men. That is to say, He chose to share with them those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind”.

It was in consideration of this existential position of man (that he needed to be saved after having committed the Original Sin), that God through His mercy and love sent prophets among whom was Abraham. God appointed Abraham to make him a great nation. After Abraham

“through the patriarchs, and after them through Moses and the prophets, He taught this people to acknowledge Himself the one living and true God, provident father and just judge, and to wait for the Savior promised by Him, and in this manner prepared the way for the Gospel down through the centuries.” (Dei Verbum).

It is at this point that the revelation of Christ becomes necessary. The importance of Christ is in the fact that he represents the fullness of revelation. While each prophet also brought revelation, it is only in Christ that the revelation of God reaches its fullness since Christ is God himself. “We announce to you the eternal life which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we announce to you, so that you may have fellowship with us and our common fellowship be with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ”. (Dei Verbum).

Also, “By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation”. (Dei Verbum). It is difficult to say why God waited for several centuries—from the time of Adam’s descent until Christ was revealed—to actually reveal Christ and therefore a new dispensation through which mankind could attain salvation at that particular point in time. However, it needs to be reiterated that for Christians, Christ is the fullness of revelation.

### *Chapter 2: Handing on Divine Revelation*

This section comprises of articles 7-10. It tries to explain how the process of revelation takes place. It begins by reiterating the Christian truth that Christ is the fullness of revelation. But Christ also demanded that his teachings be spread far and wide so that as much of humanity as possible could attain to salvation by the Good News of his coming. He therefore, commissions his Apostles to carry on the work of preaching what he had taught them. Not only that “[t]his Gospel had been promised

in former times through the prophets, and Christ Himself had fulfilled it and promulgated it with His lips”. (*Dei Verbum*). The apostles fulfill the mission of Christ by carrying his message to the world in four ways:

- 1- In oral fashion – reporting to others what Christ had said and done.
- 2- By example – living the message of Christ
- 3- By “what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit”.
- 4- By recording in writing the message of salvation under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, meaning thereby the sacred scriptures (*Dei Verbum*).

In addition to these four basic steps, the Apostles ensured that they deliver the teachings of Christ to their successors the bishops along with the authority to teach and carry it further. It is here that the sacred tradition is actually born, although we shall have more to say about this in the pages to follow. Article 7 ends by indicating that the sacred tradition and the sacred scripture together are the “mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God...” (*Dei Verbum*).

In article 8, the expansion of the apostolic preaching is explained and the importance of holding fast to the traditions learnt “either by word of mouth or by letter” is emphasized. One can’t miss noting the conscious effort on the part of the writers of this constitution to highlight the importance of tradition. It is said that tradition “develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit”, “there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down” which happens through the contemplation and study of the believers whose characteristics are clearly defined. The church is thus constantly moving “toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her”. (*Dei Verbum*, 8).

In the last paragraph, once again it is the tradition which defines the canon of the sacred books and the sacred writings are ‘profoundly understood’ in the tradition.

Article 9 seems to be an insertion to balance the tip in favour of sacred scripture after so much has been said about the sacred tradition especially the fact that sacred tradition defines the canon of the sacred scripture. The tension that was implicit in the preceding paragraphs comes out loud and clear in this article. It is contended that both the scripture and tradition are connected as both flow from the ‘same divine wellspring’ and then ‘in a certain way’ (which the Church does not sound too sure about) ‘merge into a unity’. All this ‘For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity...’ (Dei Verbum, 9). As if this was doing injustice to the sacred tradition, it is added almost by way of correction, that ‘it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence’. (Dei Verbum, 9).

Article 10, while reiterating the significance of both the scripture and tradition, adds to our knowledge that together the two form a ‘deposit’, meaning thereby perhaps ‘one sacred deposit of the Word of God’ (Dei Verbum, p.36.) or the ‘one deposit of faith’.

The next paragraph goes on to give us an inkling of who is actually authorized to interpret ‘the word of God, whether written or handed on’. It is obviously the living teaching office of the Church which exercises this authority ‘in the name of Jesus Christ’. But lest one is prompted to make the rash judgment that the teaching office of the Church (traditionally known as the magisterium) is ‘higher’ than the scripture or tradition,

almost by way of correction, it is added that ‘the teaching office is not above the word of God (should one venture to posit that the ‘word of God’ here means the collective teachings of the scripture and tradition) but serves it...and ‘with the help of the Holy Spirit...draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed’ (*Dei Verbum*, 10).

By the time one gets to the last paragraph of article 10 and is still trying to unravel the mysterious connection between the sacred scripture and the sacred tradition, one is confronted with yet another revelation. ‘It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls (*Dei Verbum*, 10). The tension that must have prevailed during the discussion of this very thorny issue is quite apparent here. The ‘teaching authority of the Church’ is brought at par with scripture and tradition after it was said that the teaching office of the church was not above it.

### *Chapter 3: Sacred Scripture, Its Inspiration and Divine Interpretation*

In this small section, there are three articles (11-13). Its main point of discussion is divine inspiration and how the sacred scriptures are to be treated as divine while having been written physically by human authors.

Thus, while particular human beings really authored various parts of the Old and New Testaments, but since it was done under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, God must also be considered as their author. The production of these texts was only possible after God chose such noble souls to transmit His word, which they did using their powers and skills with God ‘acting in them and through them’ to compose only that which they had been consigned to write. This necessarily means that the scriptures

are the word of God and therefore without any fault and likewise portray the right path to salvation.

However, this is immediately followed by a word of caution in the next paragraph. It is true that God has spoken in the sacred scriptures, yet it was through ‘men in human fashion’. Therefore, “the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words” (Dei Verbum, 10). As a result, all interpreters should keep in mind the ‘literary forms’, usage of words and expressions and linguistic conventions prevalent at the time of writing particular pieces. Only when understood in the light of the aforementioned usages and circumstances, would the interpretation of the word of God be correct.

But that in itself is not enough. There is an intrinsic unity in the scriptures and any interpretation which rips this unity is bound to do more harm than good to the scripture. It is here that the role of tradition comes out strong. Moreover, since no one is better suited to understand these complexities than the church itself, the final judgment regarding any matter religious, goes back to the church as interpreting scripture is ‘subject finally to the judgment of the Church’.

Article 13 highlights God’s benevolence and gentleness in that He let His esteemed words be clothed in the frailty of human language. More important perhaps is the last sentence of this article which tries to create a balance between the divine authorship and human authorship of the scriptures. It reads, ‘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’ (Dei Verbum, 11).

This sentence is a clear depiction of the mysterious relationship between the human and divine in the person of Jesus Christ. For just as

there is mysteriousness in the incarnation of God in the human person of Christ, similarly, there is a mysterious relationship between the word of God and the human word with respect to the scripture (*Dei Verbum* 10, 37). It also provides for an ingenious mechanism to bridge the increasing differences arising out of modern biblical studies which more often than not end up reducing scripture to a conglomerate of historically contradicting views and a collection of myths and fables.

#### *Chapter 4: The Old Testament*

This section which comprises of articles 14-16 is brief. It adds nothing new to the traditional Catholic perspective on the manner in which the Old Testament was viewed even prior to Vatican II.

After reiterating that God had planned salvation for the whole of humanity, it goes on to describe how God initially chose Israel as His mouth piece after concluding covenants with Abraham and Moses. Israel was supposed to carry the message of God to all nations. The Old Testament in short, is the story of Israel's encounter with God and it has been told by "the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, [and] is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books, therefore, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable" (*Dei Verbum*, 14).

Somehow, this seems to be an initial plan only because there are things in the books of the Old Testament 'which are incomplete and temporary' and therefore need to be completed. The completion would come in the form of the revelation of Christ. It is this idea which the Old Testament is trying to make implicitly or in a 'hidden' fashion. Article 15 says it clearly, "The principal purpose to which the plan of the old covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ, the redeemer of all and of the messianic kingdom, to announce this coming by prophecy" (*Dei Verbum*, 15). But since 'these...books,...give expression to a lively

sense of God, contain a store of sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way[.] Christians should receive them with reverence' (Dei Verbum, 15).

Article 16 is a reassertion of the complementarity of the Old and the New Testaments so 'wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New' (Dei Verbum, 16).

### *Chapter 5: The New Testament*

Here is another section implicitly fraught with the tense discussions that must have gone into the writing of this section; questions relating to the authorship and authenticity of the New Testament books, particularly of the four gospels and the apostolic character of their authors would have been debated hotly. The section spans over articles 17-20.

Article 17 dilates upon the fullness of Christ's revelation which came in the 'fullness of time'. This mystery had not been manifested to other generations as it was now revealed to His holy Apostles and prophets in the Holy Spirit (see Eph. 3:4-6, Greek text), so that they might preach the Gospel, stir up faith in Jesus, Christ and Lord, and gather together the Church. Now the writings of the New Testament stand as a perpetual and divine witness to these realities' (Dei Verbum, 17).

Articles 18 is a reassertion of the apostolic nature of the books of the New Testament, especially the four Gospels which clearly reflect the teachings that 'the Apostles preached in fulfillment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing' (Dei Verbum, 18).

It is in the next article (Article 19) that the tension becomes evident. The two commissions that were drafting this constitution were the Theological Commission and the Secretariat for the Unity of Christians. In common parlance, both represented the conservatives and the liberals

respectively. While the liberals would usually assign substantial importance to the results of critical biblical methods, the conservatives were averse to all such developments and viewed the Bible as the truly infallible word of God. The article can clearly be divided into two distinct parts. Part one beginning with ‘Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels..., whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts,...’ reiterates the traditional standpoint of the church. The second part reads as follows:

‘The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches and preserving the form of proclamation but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus. For their intention in writing was that either from their own memory and recollections, or from the witness of those who “themselves from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word” we might know “the truth” concerning those matters about which we have been instructed (see Luke 1:2-4)’ (Dei Verbum, 19).

As Ronald D. Witherup points out, three layers of tradition must be acknowledged here, namely, oral, written and edited (Dei Verbum, 19: 39). What needs to be noted here is:

1. The council affirms that the authors received the word and deeds of Christ in two physical forms: in writing and by word of mouth. Also, when they wrote, they would write ‘from their own memory and recollections’ or ‘from the witness of those who “themselves from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word”’.
2. The authors were selective in what they wrote implying that there was much (‘selecting some things from the many’) that was not recorded. Needless to say, selection is itself a process of editing.
3. ‘Some things’ were explained ‘in view of the situation of their churches and preserving the form of proclamation’ which could very much

have been different.

4. The one common thread, however, was that ‘they told us the honest truth about Jesus’ perhaps meaning thereby that even if some inconsistencies were to creep in, no one could suspect their purity of intention and sense of honesty.

The least that these points clarify is the fact that what the authors wrote might not always be historically sound.

#### *Chapter 6: Sacred Scriptures in the Life of the Church*

This section is almost entirely devoted to the pastoral influence of this constitution. It comprises of articles 21-26 and clearly adds quite a few newer insights into the churches relation with various Christian communities, including the ‘separated brethren’.

Article 21 extols the sacred scripture along with the sacred tradition as the supreme rule of faith. Although there is nothing new in this statement as it occurs differently in earlier articles, yet it needs to be reiterated as the Catholic Church proceeds cautiously to open up its doors to other dispensations. Nothing stands outside the pale of sacred scripture and sacred tradition.

Article 22 is almost certainly the fulfillment of the dreams of an acknowledgment of the influence of the Biblical Movement which with unremitted devotedness worked to place the Bible over and before everything that was Christian. It starts by ‘easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful’. It then goes on to espouse, albeit in subtle terms, the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate, adding in between the lines, ‘and she [the Church] has always given a place of honor to other Eastern translations’. The last sentence of the article also represents the careful stance of the Council as it extends a hand of cautious cooperation to the separated brethren, albeit, under the watchful eyes of Church authorities to work on translations of the Bible acceptable

to both.

The next article continues to welcome, with the same caution, exegetes of the Bible and other biblical scholars to continue doing their work ‘with a constant renewal of vigor’ in explaining the sacred writings. But all this should be done under the ‘watchful care of the sacred teaching office of the Church’ and ‘following the mind of the Church’.

Article 24 highlights the importance of sacred scripture and sacred tradition in the study of sacred theology for ‘the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology’.

Article 25 encourages the priests, deacons and catechists to ‘hold fast to the Sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study’ for ‘ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’. This relation with the sacred scripture can be strengthened through the liturgy, devotional reading, instructions as might be suitable and prayers. Furthermore, translations with ‘adequate explanations’ ought to be prepared for other Christians while for non-Christians editions of Sacred Scripture with notes and ‘adapted to their [respective] situation[s]’ should be made ready and distributed in known ways.

The final article of the constitution stresses the need to spread the word of God ‘which lasts forever’ so that it may fill the hearts of men more and more.

This quite briefly is what the Constitution on Divine Revelation has to say. Several aspects of the Constitution can be highlighted and further clarified, yet no issue takes precedence over the ongoing and legitimate debate on the mutual relation of the Scripture and the Tradition with the role of the Holy Spirit in making this relation work.

### **The Scripture-Tradition Predicament**

It is evident from this brief summary of *Dei Verbum* that one of the most knottiest problems in the understanding of revelation is to

describe how Scripture relates to the magisterial Tradition. It needs to be remembered that this problem arose after the Protestant Reformation. Protestants adopted a doctrine of “sola scriptura”, by which they meant that the Bible is the sole source which provides authoritative teaching for Christian life. In addition to the Scripture, the Catholic Church also emphasized the magisterial teaching of the church (Tradition) as authoritative. In the pages to follow, we shall try to make some sense of this mysterious relationship.

### *The Authority of Scripture*

Christians consider the Bible to be authoritative because they hold it to be the inspired Word of God. Second Timothy states:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3, 16-17)

This passage asserts that God is the source of the Scriptures’ meaning, and they provide sound guidance on how to live a righteous life. Moreover, God’s Spirit – the Holy Spirit – is the guarantor of the truth and authenticity of the Bible. *Dei Verbum* also confirms this stance (*Dei Verbum* 9, 10).

How do Catholics generally understand God as the “author” of the Bible considering that the church also asserts that human authors composed the Scriptures “in human fashion” (DV, 12), thus requiring interpreters to become aware of the various literary forms present in the Bible that are of human origin. Yet inspiration means that the Scriptures contain not merely a human message, but a divine one.

Historically, inspiration has been understood in multiple ways. There are various theories of inspiration, summarized succinctly in the following lines (Gaillardet 2003, 15-40):

1. Strict verbal inspiration: Each word of the Bible is inspired; emphasis on the literal reading of Scripture; inspiration connected with inerrancy of the Bible; can apply either to the “original autographs” of the Bible or to translations;
2. Limited verbal inspiration: The Scriptures are verbally inspired but in the limited sense of the historical knowledge and cultural context of the biblical authors;
3. Inspiration of the content: What is inspired is the meaning or content of each passage of the Bible rather than the words themselves;
4. Inspiration of the human authors: The biblical authors were directly inspired by God but chose human words to express their religious experience;
5. Inspiration of the early Christian community: Acknowledging the lengthy and complex process by which the Scriptures came into being over centuries, inspiration is imputed to the early Christian community, which ultimately led to the creation of the canon.

Each of these theories has advantages and disadvantages. Prior to the twentieth century, most Christians, including Catholics, accepted the first theory of strict verbal inspiration. They thought that inspiration was inherently connected to the notion of inerrancy, meaning that the Bible could contain no errors whatsoever, whether religious, historical, or scientific. Strict biblical fundamentalists still espouse this theory.

In fact, the Catholic position even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was much the same, as reflected in the following quotation from Leo XIII’s famous encyclical, *Providentissimus Deus*:

For all the books in their entirety, which the Church receives as sacred and canonical, with all their parts, have been written under the dictation of the Holy Spirit. Now it is utterly impossible that divine inspiration could give rise to any error; it not only by its very

nature excludes all error, but excludes and rejects it with the same necessity by which it is impossible that God, the highest Truth, be the author of any error whatsoever.

It is futile to argue that the Holy Spirit took human beings as his instruments in writing, implying that some error could slip in, not indeed from the principal author, but from the inspired writers. For by his supernatural power he stimulated and moved them to write, and so assisted them while they were writing, that they properly conceived in their mind, wished to write down faithfully, and expressed aptly with infallible truth all those things, and only those things, which he himself ordered; otherwise he could not himself be the author of the whole of Sacred Scripture (Dupuis, 102).

Such a statement expresses the same position as that of biblical fundamentalists today.

One major problem with this view of inspiration and inerrancy, however, is the inability to decide which text is the inspired one. There are no original texts in existence. Rather, there are thousands of manuscript traditions in the original languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Latin). Which manuscript tradition is authoritative? The current editions of the Hebrew Bible, the Greek New Testament, and the Latin Vulgate are all based on scholarly decisions about which families of manuscripts seem to be the most authentic.

This theory raises another question: Does this biblical inspiration apply to translations and not simply to the “originals”? Is the King James Version of the Bible (1611), revered by fundamentalists, the only inspired translation, and, if so, why? These and similar questions make this view of inspiration highly problematic, and it no longer reflects the Catholic stance on inspiration.

The second theory, limited verbal inspiration, seems to be in tune with a Catholic approach. Even some patristic authors proposed that God accommodated the limitations of the human authors so that the “Word” could be communicated in an understandable fashion. This theory allows

for an acknowledgment of the human dimension of the divine text. The biblical text consequently reflects the cultural and linguistic limitations of the authors.

The third and fourth theories seem to hold some potential from a Catholic standpoint yet they also have limitations. It is quite difficult if not impossible to ascertain either the definitive meaning of texts or the intention of the human authors, and, in either case, the meaning of the words involved is still the critical issue. Many experts of “literary criticism” emphasize that they have no way of knowing an ancient author’s intentions. Moreover, once a text comes into its existence, it has a life of its own. Regardless of the author’s intentions, later readers or generations of readers will elicit meanings from the text that were never in the author’s mind but which can legitimately emerge from interpretations of the text. (*Dei Verbum*, 92).

The fifth theory, creates room for the lengthy process of the birth of the biblical tradition in terms of oral, written, and edited stages, such as espoused by the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s (henceforth PBC) document, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*. It is espoused by both modern Catholic and Protestant authors. This theory proposes that the real locus of biblical inspiration is not in the Bible itself or in the actual words but in the early communities that preserved these sacred writings and eventually bound them into a restricted collection, the sacred canon, a sure measure or norm for Christian living.

*Dei Verbum* does not adopt any one theory of inspiration nor does the Catechism (CCC, 105), which essentially relies on the constitution. The critical passage in *Dei Verbum* is found in article 11:

Therefore, 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 that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation. (DV, 11)

“Some interpreters of the council today insist that this passage essentially affirms the strict verbal inspiration of Scripture, with its concomitant notion of inerrancy, understood literally. Others maintain that this is a misreading of the passage. The council fathers used the phrase “without error” eschewing the word “inerrancy” because of its association with biblical fundamentalism. They further explained that this expression applies to “that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.” This choice of words is quite significant. The lack of error pertains not to every dot and dash of Scripture but to that essential truth necessary for the salvation of Christians. Inspiration, then perhaps does not concern historical or scientific content but religious content, specifically, moral and doctrinal truths essential to salvation ((*Dei Verbum*, 92).

In his commentary on this section of the constitution, Cardinal Bea pointed out that the council fathers did not intend to propose a limited notion of inerrancy

The basic idea of the absolute truth of the Scriptures is always the same, although it may be differently expressed. The Constitution expresses most forcefully the notion that Scripture absolutely guarantees the faithful transmission of God’s revelation (Bea 1967, 187).

That is to say, they did not mean to divide inerrancy into opposing categories of faith versus science or history. He goes on to defend his personal interpretation that the constitution does not limit inspiration to faith and morals. Yet he does affirm that the important expression in the constitution concerns the truths essential “for our salvation.” In the end, there continues to be a struggle about how best to understand this notion of inspiration in a manner that is true to the final form of the constitution but also reflects the debates that led to the compromised wording. My impression is that the Catholic position as reflected in *Dei*

*Verbum* completely affirms biblical inspiration but without resolving how best to explain it in detail. The topic would obviously keep future Catholic theologians engaged for some time to come.

### Tradition

Many people think of “tradition” as customs, routine behaviours, or attitudes that one knew when growing up or have been passed on in a family from one generation to another. In fact many Catholics conceive of Tradition and Scripture as a two drawer cabinet holding all the “truths” of divine revelation. One drawer (Scripture) contains the truths of the Bible and all Christians share in this drawer. The second drawer refers to another set of truths not explicitly found in the Bible. This second drawer is Tradition and it is thought to be in the exclusive possession of the Catholic Church (Gaillardetz). The word “Tradition” means the entire body of teaching and practice in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is a record of God’s covenantal relationship with his chosen people, right down to the beginnings of the church expressed through the apostolic traditions recounted in the Bible and beyond.

The biblical sense of the word “tradition” denotes both a process of handing on truth from one generation to another and the content of that truth. For example, St. Paul speaks of handing on traditions about the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:23-26) and the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:3-11). These are not trivial rituals, rather important things to remember. The process of handing on these truths was as important as the message they contained.

In a pre-Vatican II setting, Tradition came to denote primarily a body of authoritative teachings, apart from Scripture, that contained the truths of the Catholic faith. When the popes of the nineteenth century began to issue “encyclical letters,” which were intended as authoritative teachings in their own right, this practice reinforced the content-oriented notion of Tradition. In contrast, *Dei Verbum* seems to propose a more

‘dynamic’ understanding of Tradition.

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. *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 Luke, 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. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her. (DV, 8)

The phrase “*For there is a growth...handed down*” expresses a sense of dynamism in the church’s Tradition as it proceeds through the ages. It is also reminiscent of Pope John XXIII’s notion at the beginning of the council that the expression of the truths of the faith is different from the truths themselves. Every age needs to make an effort to communicate the truth contained in the Tradition of the church in ways that make it more understandable to people.

Cardinal Bea’s commentary is helpful here. After acknowledging the seemingly paradoxical expression of “developing tradition,” he states: “The development of tradition consists of an ever growing understanding of its object, in its entirety.” It is not a question of a totally new revelation that comes into existence in this developing tradition. Rather, the comprehension and depth of awareness of God’s self-revelation can deepen over time.

## **Understanding the relationship between Scripture and Tradition**

Just as Vatican II rejected the propositional view of revelation, so too it rejected a proposal to affirm two separate sources of revelation. The pertinent section of *Dei Verbum* (article 9) was, in fact, much debated.

When the council fathers rejected the first schema's attempt to delineate two sources of revelation, the real challenge became how to express the interrelationship of Scripture and Tradition. This is a part of the constitution that many find unsatisfying, because it does not offer a clear resolution to the question (DV, 9 and 10).

Again, Cardinal Bea's explanation is helpful. He points out that "the document does not say that the sacred writings are understood only in light of tradition.?" Nor does the constitution say "...that tradition is necessary for the deeper understanding of scripture.?"! Tradition can help bring greater clarity to the interpretation of Scripture because the sum total of Tradition (i.e., devotion, liturgical practice, meditation, study, and so on) helps focus on the meaning of the text in different eras of the church's history. The meaning of the Scriptures, then, is not self-evident. It is not immediately transparent to any casual interpreter. Careful exegesis is required to ascertain, first, the literal sense of the words, and then second, deeper meanings that are contained therein.

The church promotes this exercise of interpretation in the context of its whole living Tradition. It should be remembered that it was the Tradition of the church that helped bring the canon of Sacred Scripture into being. There is, in a sense, a back-and-forth relationship between Scripture and Tradition. On the one hand, Scripture is a special gift from God, through the Holy Spirit, that instructs Christians and reveals God's intentions. But the Bible did not just descend miraculously from heaven. It grew from the experience of Christian ancestors in faith. On the other hand, the church itself determined, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the extent of the Scriptures. Scripture and Tradition thus involve a dialectical relationship. The church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, defined the extent of the canon and determined which books were acceptable and which were not. This was a long and complex process that went on for centuries. It did not reach a definitive conclusion until the

Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, when the limits of the canon were formally confirmed.

Commenting on this hazy relationship, Cardinal Bea notes that the council fathers left the formulation rather broad for the following reason:

The Council wished to emphasize the fundamental importance of tradition, without however deciding the question which Catholics still debate on the so-called ‘sufficiency of Holy Scripture’, whether, that is to say, all revealed truths are at least implicitly contained in the written word of God, or whether on the contrary, some of them are received by the Church from oral tradition alone (Gaillardetz).

This is to say that the mysterious interrelationship between Scripture and Tradition is not resolved in the constitution, and scholars continue to debate the issue. What is clear, however, is that Scripture and Tradition continue to inform one another. There is a back-and-forth, a give-and-take kind of relationship. After all, *Dei Verbum* strongly cautioned that the church is the servant- not the master-of the Scriptures: “This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it,…” (DV, 10). But there is also the function of the entire Tradition of the church to help guide ones understanding of Scripture through the ages, beginning with but not restricted to the apostolic preaching. This dialectic is not likely to be entirely clarified, and this I believe is the loop from where confusion sets into various aspects of Christian theology.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it needs to be said that while Scripture and Tradition are distinctive entities, they overlap. The Holy Spirit is equally active in both of these spheres because, in reality, they constitute one divine source of revelation. The magisterium, seemingly a third entity, has its own distinctive role to play. In some ways, the magisterium stands apart from the Tradition of the church, yet it is also an essential part of the Tradition. *Dei Verbum* notes that the magisterium’s exclusive role is to ensure, under

the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the authentic interpretation of the Word of God. But the “living teaching office of the Church” is also the bearer of the Tradition of the church. Ultimately, then, the magisterium helps to interpret both Scripture and Tradition authentically, “in the name of Jesus Christ”. Yet *Dei Verbum* equally stresses that the magisterium does not stand above the Word of God but serves it. The magisterium itself can be corrected by insights from Scripture and Tradition. God directs the efficacy of all three entities under the Holy Spirit. The constitution concludes its discussion of this complex relationship with the following summary:

It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls (DV, 10).

There is, of course, a problem that some would see with this scenario. They would note that the magisterium’s role has seemingly grown so much that there seems to be little control over it, despite the constitution’s insistence that it is “not above the Word of God, but serves it” (DV, 10). Some council fathers foresaw this problem and expressed uneasiness with it, even during the discussions of article 10. They felt that *Dei Verbum* did not say enough about the role of the Word in supervising the teaching office of the church itself.

Christopher Butler, for example, at an ecumenical conference held in 1966 to examine the teachings of Vatican II, voiced his concern with these words:

It is all very well for us to say and believe that the magisterium is subject to Holy Scripture. But is there anybody who is in a position to tell the magisterium: Look, you are not practicing your subjection to Scripture in your teaching (Miller (ed.), 1966, 89).

Such sentiments harmonize well with concerns expressed by some theologians and others in recent years that the teaching office of the church has grown more authoritarian. They believe that the magisterium needs once more to root itself in the teaching of *Dei Verbum*, but one has to admit that the constitution is not as clear on the subject as one might like. There is essentially a paradox here. John R. Donahue summarizes it well in these words:

Thus the teaching office is simultaneously the servant of the Word and its authentic interpreter; the whole Church determines the development of tradition, but is subordinate to the teaching authority? (Donahue 1993, 291).

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