

The Bible in Current Catholic Theology

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The battle raging in the non-Catholic world with regard to revelation, the inspiration, inerrancy, and interpretation of the Bible, the meaning of the term "Word of God," and related questions has not by-passed Roman Catholic theology. Although such terms as "documentary hypothesis," "form criticism," "demythologize," "Christ event," "kerygma," "genre," and the rest of the vocabulary of the New Hermeneutic were coined by Protestant theologians, Catholic scholars have appropriated them and have plunged headlong into the debate. Generally speaking, it must be said that they have accepted the critical theories that were developed, for the most part, in Protestant university circles.

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, for example, says, "Many Catholic OT scholars now agree that the documentary hypothesis is valid in principle as at least a partial answer to the problem of the origin of the OT books."¹ A casual glance into such products of contemporary Catholic theology as *The Jerusalem Bible*² or *A New Catechism*³ will readily substantiate this fact. Indeed, the views of higher criticism are presented in these books in a disarmingly fascinating, popular style.

The change that has taken place in the Roman Catholic attitude toward the Source Theory of the origin of the Pentateuch is frankly acknowledged in the Introduction in *The Jerusalem Bible*:

In a Response dated June 27th 1906 the Pontifical Biblical Commission put Catholic exegetes on their guard against this Documentary Theory and required them to maintain the 'substantial' Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch taken as a whole. The Commission, however, recognized the possibility of pre-Mosaic oral traditions and written documents; it granted, too, that modifications and additions subsequent to Moses may have been made. In a letter to Cardinal Suhard (January 16th 1948) the Commission more explicitly conceded the existence of sources and admitted a gradual growth of the Mosaic laws and of the historical narratives, a growth due to social and religious conditions of later times.⁴

Walter Kasper of the University of Muenster points to modern Biblical exegesis as the reason for the lively theological discussion currently going on in the Catholic Church: "In the past this was also hampered by a frequently sterile and purely apologetic approach. But here, too, the attitude has become more positive and open-minded since the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943); the recent statements of the biblical commission, and the Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican Council II."⁵ The 1943 encyclical was issued, of course, during the reign of Pius XII, and, according to the French theologian Yves Congar, Pius liked to refer to it as "that liberating encyclical."⁶ Without question, it did, in a sense, liberate Catholic scholars, who were chafing at the bit to get into the critical and hermeneutical fray.

¹ William R. McDonald, editor in chief, *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, St. Louis: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), Volume II, p. 504.

² Alexander Jones, editor, *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966).

³ Commissioned by the Hierarchy of the Netherlands and produced by the Higher Catechetical Institute at Nijmegen in collaboration with numerous others, *A New Catechism, Catholic Faith for Adults*, translated by Kevin Smyth (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967).

⁴ *The Jerusalem Bible*, p. 7.

⁵ Walter Kasper, "The Relationship between Gospel and Dogma: An Historical Approach," in *Concilium, Theology in an Age of Renewal* (New York: Paulist Press, 1964-), Vol. 21, p. 166.

⁶ Yves Congar, "Christ in the Economy of Salvation and in Our Dogmatic Tracts," *Concilium*, Vol. 11, p. 5.

I. Revelation, the Bible, and Tradition

What is a revelation? Is it a continuing process, or is a fixed corpus of revealed truth transmitted from generation to generation? Is all apostolic teaching contained in the Bible, implicitly if not explicitly, or is tradition an independent source of doctrine transmitting authentic apostolic teaching not embodied in the Scriptures? Is there one source of revelation, or two? What, precisely, is the relationship between the Bible and tradition? The debate on these and similar questions continues unabated in the world of contemporary Catholic theology.

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, approved in the Fourth Session of Vatican Council II, speaks of revelation primarily in terms of salvation history. Chapter I makes a brief reference to God's revelation of Himself in nature and then discusses at length His supernatural revelation of Himself in a series of divine personal acts and utterances, the final and definitive of these acts being the Incarnation.

Chapter II of the Constitution is entitled "The Transmission of Divine Revelation." It asserts that "Christ the Lord, in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion . . . commissioned the apostles to preach to all men that gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching."⁷ This commission they fulfilled both by their oral preaching and by committing the message of salvation to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Then follows the significant statement, "But in order to keep the gospel forever whole and alive within the Church, the apostles left bishops as their successors, 'handing over their own teaching role to them. This sacred tradition, therefore, and sacred Scripture of both the Old and the New Testament are like a mirror in which the pilgrim Church on earth looks at God, from whom she has received everything, until she is brought finally to see Him as He is face to face.'⁸

In an extensive footnote R.A.F. MacKenzie, the editor of this particular document, points out that this formulation is a compromise between two opposing views on the question of whether there are one or two sources of divine revelation. He says:

Here arises the question of "two sources" of divine revelation. Scripture is clearly something different from a living oral tradition; but as sources from which we may learn what God has in the past revealed, can Scripture and tradition be treated separately, or must they always be treated together?

The prevailing view since the Council of Trent has been that they may be treated separately, and statements of revealed truth (dogmas) may be gathered from tradition alone, though they are in no way contained in Scripture.

The other opinion, recently revived, which claims to be the pre-Tridentine teaching, maintains that all Christian revelation is contained in Scripture, not necessarily in explicit terms sufficient to 'prove' it, but at least by implication, which can be made explicit in the light of tradition.

The question was much debated in the Council, and the majority of the Fathers preferred not to decide it one way or the other.⁹

Is there any basis in the Bible for Rome's claims regarding tradition? Does the Bible indicate that there has been an oral transmission of a body of apostolic teaching consisting either of an expansion of what is implied in the Bible or of a body of doctrine not contained in the Bible at all? Rome has usually cited II Thessalonians 2:15 as proof that apostolic teaching has been passed on from generation to generation by means

⁷ Waiter M. Abbott, S.J., General editor, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, American Press, Association Press, 1966), p. 115. Hereafter cited as *Documents*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, Footnote 15.

of two parallel streams of transmission, the one oral and the other written. This passage is again referred to in the discussion in Article 8 of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.

In II Thessalonians 2:15 Paul admonishes his readers to “stand fast and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.” He indicates what these “traditions” are in the preceding verse, where he refers to what he has taught as “our gospel.” The παραδόσεις that the Thessalonians had been taught, the truths handed down to them, were, of course, the teachings of Jesus. They were the teachings He was speaking of when He instructed His disciples to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). Paul carried out these instructions both in his oral preaching and in his writing. He places both his preaching and his writing on the same level. He preached nothing he did not write; he wrote nothing he did not preach. His doctrine in both its oral and written form is his “gospel.” It is the same Gospel in whatever form he has presented it. These are the traditions the Thessalonians had been taught, the truths Paul had delivered to them.

According to Rome, however, tradition is something different from the sacred Scriptures. Tradition is even said to grow and develop within the church. Article 8 declares:

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 that have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (cf. Luke 2:19,51), through the intimate understanding of spiritual things 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.¹⁰

MacKenzie in a footnote calls this “a description of the ‘development of dogma.’”¹¹ That there is such a development in Roman dogma cannot be denied in view of the promulgation of the dogma of the immaculate conception of Mary in 1854 and of her bodily assumption in 1950. John Henry Newman and others in the 19th century explained that the development lies in making explicit what is already contained in a statement.¹² Today the new concept of revelation is invoked.

Herbert Hammans of Moenchengladbach, West Germany, defines revelation as “first of all a happening, a self-communication of God to the created mind.”¹³ Hammans frankly confesses that his views have been strongly influenced by Karl Rahner, professor of dogmatic theology and the history of dogma at the University of Muenster.

Rahner is an existentialist. For him existentialism provides the explanation for the development of dogma. He speaks in terms of a continuing revelation. His very definition of revelation bears the impress of Martin Buber’s I-Thou confrontation and Karl Barth’s “event of Jesus Christ.”

“At its origin,” according to Rahner, “revelation is not the communication of a number of propositions ... but an historical dialogue between God and man in which something happens and in which the communication is related to an event, to an action of God.”¹⁴ The existential experience of God becomes the source of new revelation:

Spirit and word together create the permanently active possibility of an experience that is, in principle, the same as that of the apostles, even though our experience is always essentially

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Footnote 19.

¹² See Herbert Hammans, “Recent Catholic Views on the Development of Dogma,” *Concilium*, Vol. 21, p. 109.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁴ Quoted in Hammans, *op. cit.*, pp. 112f.

founded on that of the apostles, since it rests on the transmitted word of the apostles, and, founded on that, continues it.¹⁵

Rahner candidly acknowledges the attraction and appeal that modern Protestant theology has for contemporary Catholic scholars like himself: “It must also be clearly emphasized that we have much to learn not only from Protestant exegesis and biblical theology, but also from Protestant systematic theology.”¹⁶

Hammans sees tradition as growing and developing in the Church as a direct result of the Church’s reflection on what has been set down in the Bible:

The intellectual approach sees in tradition first of all a source that contains revelation alongside of scripture so that one can derive dogmas from it. This well known but really too static concept of tradition cannot do justice to the fullness of that phenomenon or to the intricate interconnection of either scripture and tradition or tradition and the Church. And so since the 19th century there has developed in theology a tendency to see in the post-biblical tradition not so much a static quantity, but rather a dynamic and vital process (active tradition) that reflects upon and explains the divine revelation which found its first expression, guaranteed by God, in scripture (objective tradition) with the participation of all the members of the Church (subjective tradition). As such it becomes more of a ‘declaring tradition’ than a constitutive one, and as such is interesting for an explanation of dogmatic developments.¹⁷

Maurice Blondel, a French Catholic philosopher (1861–1949), has exercised a strong influence on modern Catholic theology with his views (as summarized by Hammans) that “tradition does not transmit a series of venerable sentences or actions from the past but the living reality itself. It rests on the texts, but at the same time on an experience that is happening all the time and which allows it to dominate the texts. It formulates truths that have been lived in the past without being able to express them. ‘Even when it discovers something it still has the feeling of only having rediscovered it faithfully.’ In this way it passes from ‘what is lived implicitly to what is known explicitly.’ Tradition is then identical with ‘action.’”¹⁸

The existentialist influence here is obvious. During Blondel’s lifetime his views found little understanding among his contemporaries. Today, however, his thoughts are finding widespread acceptance among Catholic theologians. A. Liégé, for example, says, “the real theory of development is the living and active tradition; it is Pentecost continued.”¹⁹ Men like Karl Rahner, as was previously mentioned, Hugo Rahner, Yves Congar, H. de Lubac, and E. Schillebeeckx think along the same lines.

Pierre Benoit, director of the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem, who was a peritus at Vatican Council II, speaks of “the *apostolic* tradition which begins with the teaching of the apostles and rises toward the era of Revelation not yet closed!”²⁰ This continuing revelation or living tradition, he insists, is inspired in the same sense that the Scriptures are inspired. “Scriptural inspiration has nothing to fear from seeing itself put back into the great pattern of ‘biblical’ inspiration of which it is a part, next to and following ‘pastoral’ and ‘oral’ inspiration. . . . The Reformers reified the Scriptures as the sole source of revelation, at the same time rejecting tradition. From the beginning, the Council of Trent answered them by establishing that both Scriptures and tradition were inspired.”²¹

During the 19th century, when the inspiration of the Scriptures came under attack, the matter of the inspiration of tradition was permitted to fade into the background of theological discussion. “To reinstate in

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁶ Karl Rahner, *The Church after the Council* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), p. 98.

¹⁷ Hammans, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Pierre Benoit, O.P., “Inspiration and Revelation,” *Concilium*, Vol. 10, p. 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*

emphasis the inspiration of tradition side-by-side with the inspiration of the Scriptures will surely be of great value,” Benoit holds, “in delineating more sharply the subtle interchange that marks their relationship; they are not two sources from which parallel streams, different ‘truths,’ emanate, but rather two ways of talking about the same inspired current of truth —part of it lived and spoken, the other written. This one truth controls the faith and practice of the Church in a rich, two-fold manner, the Word guaranteed by the text, and the text animated by the ever-living Word.”²²

What, then, is the relationship between tradition and Scripture? Article 9 of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation describes it in this way:

Both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit. To the successors of the apostles, sacred tradition hands on in its full purity God’s word, which was entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. Thus, led by the light of the Spirit of truth, these successors can in their preaching preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently, it is not from sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything that has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and sacred scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence.²³

MacKenzie informs us that the statement, “It is not from sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed,” was one of the last additions to the text, made at the request of the Pope. MacKenzie adds, “It does not exclude the opinion that all revelation is in some way, though perhaps obscurely, contained in Scripture. But this may not suffice for certitude, and in fact the Church always understands and interprets Scripture in the light of her continuous tradition.”²⁴

We have an indication here of the intense struggle and fierce debate which finally resulted in the compromise formulation one now finds in the Dogmatic Constitution. The history of this document is not lacking in drama. MacKenzie gives us the following account of the events:

Before the Council assembled, the Theological Commission had prepared a preliminary draft. When this was presented for discussion in the first session (November, 1962), it met with severe criticism. After a few days, a vote was taken to decide whether the draft should be returned to the commission to be rewritten. The result was affirmative by about 60%; but, according to the regulations set up beforehand, a two-thirds majority was required for this somewhat drastic step. It was at this point that Pope John XXIII made his famous intervention: he overrode the regulation, confirmed the majority preference, and constituted a new joint commission to recast the text.

The schema therefore was largely rewritten. The original first chapter, “Two Sources of Revelation” (namely, Scripture and tradition), was replaced by two chapters, on revelation itself and on its transmission, in which Scripture and tradition were not explicitly distinguished as separate “sources.” The treatment in general became less philosophical, more biblical and historical. More stress was laid on modern methods of interpretation of Scripture, in accordance with the forward-looking doctrine of the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of 1943.

Although this text was ready for the second session, in 1963, it was not presented then. Instead, it underwent further revision the following year in the commission, and was brought up for discussion, and voted on, in the third session, 1964. The Council Fathers presented many *modi* (amendments), and the commission made further alterations in consideration of these. In

²² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²³ *Documents*, p. 117.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the fourth session, additional last-minute corrections were made, some at the request of Pope Paul VI. Finally, the definitive text was approved by an almost unanimous vote, and was promulgated on November 18, 1965.²⁵

Leo Bakker, a Dutch Jesuit, comments on the difference between the first and the final versions of the document: “Perhaps the most striking difference was the abandonment of the teaching on ‘the two separate sources of revelation’, scripture and tradition, which in the old view were complementary to each other, even in content. Nowhere in the Constitution was it still maintained that tradition contains certain revealed truths that are not in scripture, as was stated explicitly in the preparatory text. However, apart from this difference, which caused an emotional upheaval during the first session, there were others that without doubt are equally important. The whole atmosphere was changed. There were no more superfluous and wholly unjustified condemnations of positions held by outstanding Catholic theologians such as Rahner and Benoit. But there was a basic change in what revelation was.”²⁶

The first draft of the Constitution had defined revelation very exclusively as “a supernatural *speaking* by God.” It had condemned the view that revelation occurs through an existential experience. Bakker says, “One even has the dizzy feeling of a double somersault when one reads that in the Old Testament God revealed himself, in words and deeds; thus, Israel was destined to discover by experience which were God’s ways with men, to understand them more deeply and clearly day by day when God spoke through the prophets, and to spread their knowledge among the nations. This idea does not greatly differ from what the first schema wanted to condemn.”²⁷

The history of this document helps us to understand the opening sentence in Article 10, “Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the Church.”²⁸

By way of illustration, one might conceive of the Word of God, then, as a river in which two currents, Scripture and tradition, are flowing side by side. Both originate from the same source, God. Others would prefer to think of tradition as the river, with the oral and written forms of tradition forming the two currents. Scripture they would call written tradition.

Because this document is a compromise statement, complete clarity and unity are not to be found in it. Peter van Leeuwen of The Netherlands is one of those, for example, who regard tradition as a broad concept of which Scripture is but a part. “Tradition,” he says, “is more comprehensive and in fact includes scripture... Tradition is therefore total and is expressed in many ways. Within this tradition, scripture occupies the very special place due to the living Word of God written down once and for all as the fixed preaching of the apostles, and for this reason stands above, and dominates, the Church and its tradition.”²⁹ Not all Catholic theologians will agree, one may be sure, with van Leeuwen’s claim, “The wider comprehensiveness of tradition does not mean that tradition adds to scripture, even insofar as the strictly dogmatic content of faith is concerned. There is hardly any further basis for this opinion in the teaching on revelation and its transmission as presented in this Constitution.”³⁰

It is difficult to reconcile this claim with van Leeuwen’s own comparison of Vatican II with Trent and with Vatican I: “Tradition is no longer described as the embodiment of the unchangeable but as growth.” Citing Article 8, he comments, “Tradition and development are so intimately related to one another that we must say that not only our knowledge of tradition develops, but also tradition itself. And here we certainly should not think primarily of the so-called development of dogma by way of deduction, but rather of the always

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

²⁶ Leo Bakker, S.J., “What Is Man’s Place in Divine Revelation?” *Concilium*, Vol. 21, p. 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁸ *Documents*, p. 117.

²⁹ Peter van Leeuwen, O.F.M., “The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” *Concilium*, Vol. 21, p. 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

contemporary nature of tradition that is indeed defined as transmitting divine revelation and making it operative in the historical present.”³¹

In spite of all that Leeuwen has said about Scripture standing above and dominating the Church and its tradition, however, this Dutch scholar, who is a representative of what might be called the more liberal or more ecumenical wing of the Roman Catholic Church, must concede that in the sections that follow in the Constitution “Scripture and tradition are mentioned again as two separate things; further on, tradition, scripture and the ecclesiastical magisterium are classed as three distinct entities.” “This,” he tartly observes, “seems to have been the result of preoccupation with the Reformation controversy.”³²

The magisterium, the teaching office in the Church, also has a vital role to play. In its broadest sense, it includes all who proclaim the word with authority in the Church, but generally it refers to the Pope and the bishops collectively. Article 10 of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation states:

The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on,³³ has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. 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, 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. 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.³⁴

Rome’s position as outlined in this Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation stands in striking contrast, therefore, to the cardinal principle of Luther’s Reformation, the principle which has remained the watchword of orthodox Lutheranism to this day: *sola Scriptura*. Luther took his stand firmly on this principle in the *Smalcald Articles* when he declared: “The rule is: The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel.”³⁵ By “the Word of God” Luther means the Holy Scriptures. This is evident from the preceding sentence in which he insists, “It will not do to frame articles of faith from the works or words of the holy Fathers.”³⁶

This is the position taken also in the *Formula of Concord*, in which we as Lutherans declare that we receive and embrace “the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged.”³⁷ In direct contrast to Rome’s claim that sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church are equally authoritative, we hold with the *Formula of Concord* that “the Word of God [that is, the written Scriptures] alone should be and remain the only standard and rule of doctrine, to which the writings of no man should be regarded as equal, but to which everything should be subjected.”³⁸

It is God Himself who in His holy Word bids us to take the *sola Scriptura* position. Isaiah 8:20 is clear and binding: “To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” To this we would add only I Peter 4:11, “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God.”

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 14. Examples of statements such Leeuwen is referring to will be found in Articles 9, 10, and 24.

³³ N.B. The word of God is not identical with Scripture; it is comprised of Scripture plus tradition.

³⁴ *Documents*, pp. 117-118.

³⁵ Part II, Article II, 15; *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 467.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Thor. Decl., Compr. Sum., 3; *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 851.

³⁸ Thor. Decl., Compr. Sum., 9; *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 855.

In the light of these and many other clear and simple passages, all that Rome claims regarding tradition as a source of revelation is exposed as an outright falsehood.

II. The Origin, Inspiration, and Interpretation of the Bible

Chapter III of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican Council II has the title “The Divine Inspiration and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture.” In this area, again, the influence of modern Protestant theology on contemporary Roman Catholic theology is both marked and obvious. In the theological world of today, with the exception of a few groups like ours, the emphasis is put on *man’s* role in the writing of the Scriptures. The Bible is regarded as primarily a *human* book, bearing all the marks of the fallibility of the men who wrote it and of the ignorance, the superstition, and the prejudices of the times in which they lived.

George A. Lindbeck of Yale University, a Protestant contributor to *Concilium*, the projected 50-volume symposium from which we repeatedly quoted above, attended Vatican II as a Lutheran observer. Lindbeck characterizes the contemporary view of Scripture within the Reformation tradition in these words, “It is not the words or the details which are without error, but rather the revelation to which the inspired authors testify in their very human ways.”³⁹ That this is, indeed, the attitude of the vast majority of present-day theologians, also within the Lutheran Church, any observer of the contemporary scene will be forced to admit. When the term “inerrant” is applied to the Scriptures by modern theologians, this inerrancy is limited by them to the “religious truths” revealed in the Bible for our faith, doctrine, and life. Since fallible, erring men wrote the Bible, the argument runs, what they have written is also subject to fallacy and error. “To err is human” supposedly applies also to the writing of the Scriptures.

Now, of course, we do not eliminate the human factor in the writing of the Scriptures. “God . . . spake in time past unto the fathers *by the prophets*,” we are told in Hebrews 1:1. It was God who spoke, but it was ἐν τοῖς προφήταις that He spoke. The evangelists and apostles wrote the books of the New Testament. These holy writers were as different from one another as the readers of this periodical are different from one another. They differed in their personality, in their educational and social background, and in their vocabulary and style of writing. Peter, the fisherman, was no Paul, the scholar. Amos, the herdsman of Tekoa, was no Moses, “learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22).

Nevertheless, what David confessed of himself was true of them all: “The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue” (II Samuel 23:2). It is the emphasis on the human factor at the expense of the divinely revealed fact that “holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (II Peter 1:21) to which we take exception.

This trend is evident also, however, in Roman Catholic theology today. Volume 10 of the *Concilium* series, for example, has the title *The Human Reality of Sacred Scripture*. In the Preface to this volume we read:

For several decades now, the human aspects of the Scriptures have demanded attention. The interest of exegetes tends more clearly than ever before toward the intentions of the various authors of the books of the Bible. Before asking questions on a theological level, they examine painstakingly the texts of Sacred Scripture with the help of classical and modern methods of literary analysis. This means, in fact, that the human reality of Sacred Scripture is taken quite seriously. Behind this lies the conviction that it is only through the human dimensions of the Scriptures that we can gain access to the meaning of God’s Word, which has taken shape in the Bible. It may be considered obvious, therefore, that a tension has arisen between the accepted conclusions of classical theology on the one hand and, on the other, the newer textual interpretations which seemingly disagree with classical positions. We cannot avoid the questions arising out of this tension.⁴⁰

³⁹ George A. Lindbeck, “The Problem of Doctrinal Development and Contemporary Protestant Theology,” *Concilium*, Vol. 21, p. 133.

⁴⁰ Pp. 1-2.

It is certainly true that we must always bear in mind the historical setting in which the Scriptures were written in order to understand them properly. Nevertheless, Benoit's aim and purpose are not difficult to discover when he warns, "To isolate the inspiration of the Bible from its inspired preparation in Action and Word is to run the risk of sterilizing the Bible by reifying it, to make it as barren as an abstract textbook, a collection of terse, private 'truths' which, torn from the soil that nourished them, can only deceive; again, it is to reify the Bible as though it were a preexistent Torah derived from a branch of Judaism, or an Islamic Koran, a book fallen from the sky, whose human origins and appointments have been lost."⁴¹

This is obviously a caricature. Benoit is setting up and knocking down a straw man in order to justify his own view of the *human* origin of the Scriptures *in an existential experience*: "Before being written, the message was first lived and spoken: this experience of life and this concrete speaking still reverberate in the text."⁴²

With regard to inspiration Vatican Council II declared in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation that "the books of both the Old and New Testament in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 20:31; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19–21; 3:15, 16) they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself."⁴³ It is not stated here, but the Apocrypha naturally are also regarded as sacred and canonical according to the decision of the Council of Trent.

Frederick G. Grant, an official observer at Vatican II and professor emeritus of biblical theology at Union Theological Seminary, in his "Response" to this Dogmatic Constitution criticizes this statement on the grounds "that not everything contained in holy Scripture is on one common high level of inspiration—the Old Testament genealogies, for example, or the secular poetry of Canticles."⁴⁴ This criticism is based, naturally, on Grant's own erroneous view of a limited inspiration of the Bible.

Inspiration itself is described in the Dogmatic Constitution in these terms: "In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted."⁴⁵ On the surface, this statement does not appear to be objectionable, especially since the sentence which precedes explicitly states that the books of Scripture "have God as their author." For the sake of comparison, in *This We Believe* we confess that "God gave us the Scriptures through men whom He chose and used with the languages they knew and the style of writing they had."⁴⁶ The point is, however, that the inspiration of the Scriptures is not taken seriously by Rome inasmuch as Rome does not hold to the absolute inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures.

With respect to this very matter of inerrancy the Council declared, "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 firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation." Here, please note, inerrancy is affirmed not of every word in Scripture, but "that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation."⁴⁷ The distinction is vital. The qualifying modifier of the word "truth" definitely limits its scope, restricting it to matters that have to do with our salvation.

But are we, perhaps, misreading this statement? That we are not doing this is clear from an accompanying footnote by Editor MacKenzie:

⁴¹ Pierre Benoit, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Documents*, p. 118.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁴⁶ *This We Believe, A Statement of Belief of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1967), p. 4.

⁴⁷ *Documents*, p. 119.

An earlier draft of the Constitution had joined the adjective *salutaris* (“tending to salvation”) to the word “truth.” Another last-minute change substituted the phrase “for the sake of our salvation,” to avoid seeming to limit the truth itself. The point remains the same, and can be shown by quoting a text from the following official footnote. St. Thomas Aquinas says: “Any knowledge which is profitable to salvation may be the object of prophetic inspiration. But things which cannot affect our salvation do not belong to inspiration.” Hence, Augustine says that although the sacred writers may have known astronomy, nevertheless the Holy Spirit did not intend to utter through them any truth apart from that which is profitable to salvation. He adds that this may concern either teachings to be believed or morals to be practiced.

The Bible was not written in order to teach the natural sciences, nor to give information on merely political history. It treats of these (and all other subjects) only insofar as they are involved in matters concerning salvation. It is only in this respect that the veracity of God and the inerrancy of the inspired writers are engaged. This is not a quantitative distinction, as though some sections treated of salvation (and were inerrant), while others gave merely natural knowledge (and were fallible). It is formal, and applies to the whole text. The latter is authoritative and inerrant in what it affirms about the revelation of God and the history of salvation. According to the intentions of its authors, divine and human, it makes no other affirmations.⁴⁸

Hence, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* says that despite the fact that the Church teaches the inerrancy of the Scriptures, “it is nonetheless obvious that many Biblical statements are simply not true when judged according to modern knowledge of science and history.”⁴⁹ Here, then, we meet in Roman theology the use of the term “inerrancy” in the sense in which it is used so frequently today by heterodox Lutheran theologians who limit the inerrancy of the Scriptures. They are willing to say that the Bible is “truthful” (*untrughaft*), but not without error (*irrtumslos*).

Let us see what becomes of this kind of inerrancy in an actual case. In Exodus 20:11 Moses tells us, “In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day.” The details were given in Genesis 1 and 2. The context in Exodus 20 makes it clear that ordinary, natural days are meant, since Israel’s rest on the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, is brought into relationship with God’s rest on the seventh day, after His work of creation was finished.

Catholic theologians (and others who hold this view of a limited inerrancy) will now have to ask the question: Is this a “truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation,” or not? The answer given to this question will govern the answer to be given to the question, Does “six days” mean six ordinary days or six periods of time of undefined length? Those who hold that this matter does not have a bearing on our salvation could very well subscribe to the statement on inerrancy adopted by Vatican II and still interpret the six days as six long eras. In point of fact, the theory of evolution has found general acceptance in the Catholic Church, also among its theologians.

The Introduction to the Pentateuch in *The Jerusalem Bible* has this to say regarding the first 11 chapters of Genesis:

They speak in popular style of the origin of the human race; in a simple, pictorial style suited to the mentality of unsophisticated people, they declare the fundamental truths on which the plan of salvation rests. These truths are: the Creation by God at the beginning of time, God’s special intervention in the making of man and woman, the unity of the human race, the sin of our first parents, the fall from divine favor and the penalties their descendants would inherit in consequence of their sin. All these are truths which have their bearing upon theological doctrine

⁴⁸ *Documents*, p. 119.

⁴⁹ Vol. II, p. 384.

and which are guaranteed by the authority of scripture; but they are also facts, and the certainty of the truth implies the reality of the facts. It is in this sense that the first chapters of Genesis are called historical.⁵⁰

The first footnote appended to Genesis I not only ascribes this chapter to the “priestly source,” but also adds, “The text makes use of the primitive science of its day. It would be a mistake to seek points of agreement between this schematic presentation and the data of modern science, but it is important to notice that although it bears the stamp of its period this literary form conveys a revelation of one, transcendent God, existing before the world which he created—revelation valid for all time.”⁵¹

A New Catechism, Catholic Faith for Adults, the best-selling handbook representing avant-garde Dutch Catholic theology, is outstanding for its style. It is interesting and persuasive. It is a model in presenting abstract and complex theological theories on a popular level. What a tragedy it is that its contents are so inimical to Scriptural truth and so destructive of Christian faith!

A New Catechism describes the evolution of the world in graphic terms. To give an indication of its presentation we quote the following:

The history of the nations can be carried back for five thousand years only in some parts of the world, older than this there are a few cave-paintings, a few small fertility-symbols, the remains of campfires buried deep in the earth. And then there is nothing more than a handful (of) bones from the skeletons of our ancestors.⁵²

The next paragraph has the heading “Evolution.” We read:

Is there no answer here? There is undoubtedly something. The skulls and bones that have been found tell us something that we had not known, that the further back we delve into the past, the more primitive is the type of man we find. Before *homo sapiens*, present-day man, science distinguishes Neanderthal man, his forehead, and chin receding somewhat. Earlier still, over two hundred thousand years ago, there were various forms of hominids, with strongly receding facial angles, but walking upright. They had crude stone tools and they hunted, though exactly how, we do not know. Three hundred thousand years earlier, half a million years ago, a still more primitive type can be vaguely discerned, the *Australopithecus*, an ape-like being, but more human than present-day apes. Nearly everything is uncertain—the dates, the families, the links between the various phases. One thing only stands out clearer and clearer, the marvelous fact that a species of animal living in plains and forests mounts a long, slow line of evolution to reach – us.

The life in my body comes from the beasts. This is something that many people once found shocking. Not perhaps because they thought it undignified, because Scripture had allotted man a still lower origin, the clay. The real cause of offence was rather the contrast with the Bible story. Up to very recently, the Bible was regarded too much as a sort of scientific manual, and not enough as story written to throw God’s light on the existing world. A better understanding of the Bible solved the difficulty. And richer and richer finds showed still more clearly the great drama of the spine that slowly straightened up, and the skull that took on a greater volume, as the beast developed into man.

All this seems to point to some sort of answer. Life has a direction and some sort of meaning. But the answer is not a clear one. The origin of man lies outside our grasp. When did man begin? Was the *Australopithecus* already one of us? Or were the other hominids? No doubt mankind had a beginning. The transition is hard to trace externally, but man is such a new type of existence

⁵⁰ p. 9.

⁵¹ p. 15.

⁵² p. 9.

that somewhere or other a living being must have been called “who” and not “it.” But when and where is completely lost in the mists of prehistory.⁵³

The *Catechism* continues with a description of the evolution of the universe and the origin of living matter from carbon compounds in ages incalculably remote. “Why has my life begun? Is it just a brief period of light between two unknowns?” the *Catechism* asks. “The past has nothing clear to say,” is the reply.⁵⁴

This sample will suffice to demonstrate the kind of theology that is being taught by Catholic theologians today. Is it any wonder that Catholic schools are being closed because of a lack of financial support? Why should members of a church support a separate school system when such church-related schools no longer have a philosophy of education or course content different from that of the public school system?

Catholic theologians insist, however, that the teaching of evolution is not inconsistent with the declarations of Vatican II on the inerrancy of the Scriptures. Many more examples of such teaching could easily be given from a wide variety of books and periodicals published under the Roman *imprimatur*.

Article 12 of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation opens the door for a symbolic interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2 on the part of Catholic exegetes. It states: “Since God speaks in sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, 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.”⁵⁵

As it reads, this statement appears to be satisfactory. From MacKenzie’s note, however, we see that there is more in these words than meets the eye. He tells us:

Article 12 insists on two of the main points made in Pius XII’s encyclical “*Divino Afflante Spiritu*.” The first is the importance of the intention of the human author of a scriptural book or passage. We must understand what he was aiming at, in order to interpret his words aright. The second is the distinction of “literary forms.” In ancient Israelite literature (as in any other), there were many distinct types of literary composition, each with its recognized and conventional style, idioms, and usages. There were different conventional ways of presenting the past, i.e., of writing history, with varying proportions of literalness or symbolism. The comparative study of these conventions has greatly clarified for us some difficult parts of the Old Testament.⁵⁶

The same point is made in the following paragraph of Article 12:

Those who search out the intention of the sacred writers must, among other things, have regard for “literary forms.” For truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether a text is history of one kind or another, or whether its form is that of prophecy, poetry, or some other type of speech. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express or actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of perceiving, speaking, and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the customs men normally followed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.⁵⁷

⁵³ pp. 9-10.

⁵⁴ p. 11.

⁵⁵ *Documents*, p. 120.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

What is said here is indeed true, in a sense. In interpreting Scripture the exegete must pay attention to literary forms. He must recognize figures of speech as such. Symbolical language dare not be understood in a literal sense. We need only remind ourselves of what millennialists have done with Revelation 20 as a result of their failure to recognize literary forms.

On the other hand, just this stress on literary form, or genre, as the New Hermeneutic likes to call it, provides the excuse for reading the Scriptures through the distorting lenses of higher criticism and pseudo-scientific scholarship. What is clearly a forthright historical narrative, as, for example, Genesis 1–11, these “scientific scholars” now tell us, is not that at all, but the ancient literary form of parable, symbol, or myth. It becomes the task of the professional exegete to “demythologize” the text. Pity the poor reader who doesn’t have the insights of the professionals to guide him! Yes, pity all those readers of the Scriptures who were born a century or more too soon! No wonder people thought there was a conflict between the creation account in Genesis and the theory of evolution! Thanks to contemporary Biblical scholarship, there no longer is a conflict! Modern Roman Catholic theology has pronounced a solemn “Amen” on the “assured results” of 20th century Protestant scholarship. It has experienced a “renewal” of Biblical studies!

The examples of contemporary Roman Catholic hermeneutics that we have cited to this point have been drawn from the field of Old Testament studies. The same methods are applied, however, to the interpretation of the New Testament. Here, too, *Formgeschichte*, source criticism, and demythologizing have carried the day. “Kerygma,” as this term is used in the New Hermeneutic, the religious message, is supposedly the key to New Testament interpretation. The message of the New Testament has both a historical basis and suprahistorical significance. *A New Catechism* says:

The ancient *kerygma* shows that both the historical facts and the suprahistorical significance are at the heart of the message from the start. “Died and was buried”—historical, “according to the scriptures,” “risen” and “exalted” for our salvation—suprahistorical. The whole Christian message was there from the beginning.⁵⁸

The New Catholic Encyclopedia offers a concise and correct explanation of form criticism:

The studies of M. Dibelius, ... K.L. Schmidt, ... R. Bultman, ... and M. Albertz showed that the Synoptic Gospels were not written as biographies of Jesus but rather to enshrine the faith of the early Church. The critics claimed that the Gospels could not be used as a source for the reconstruction of the portrait of the historical Jesus because they had been written on a theological rather than a historical basis. These critics claimed further that any quest of the historical Jesus, taking that word historical in its usual modern sense, would prove to be vain. Dialectical theologians, such as Karl Barth and Martin Kaehler, maintained it was unnecessary, since the object of our faith is not Jesus of history but the Jesus of faith, whose saving action is proclaimed in the kerygma.⁵⁹

Joseph Bourke, lecturer in Old Testament exegesis at Blackfriars, Oxford, writing on “The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ,” points to the total failure of “the attempt to discover the personality and career of Jesus of Nazareth as a figure in human history by the application of modern methods of research to the New Testament writings.”⁶⁰ Bourke has entitled the first part of his essay “The New Testament as the Mythological and Interpretative Creation of the Primitive Christian Communities.” He maintains:

It is impossible to construct a history of Jesus from the New Testament. For in these writings the only scientifically attainable object of historical research is not Jesus, but the first Christians

⁵⁸ p. 210.

⁵⁹ Vol. II, p. 505.

⁶⁰ *Concilium*, Vol. 11, p. 27.

believing in Jesus and interpreting him to others. What we encounter here is not Jesus as he was in himself, but *what Jesus meant* to those who, after his death, continued to believe in him and his message. The complex amalgam of traditions which constitutes the New Testament grows out of, and is woven around the single central message: the *kerygma*, or apostolic proclamation of the inward and saving significance which, so the early Christians believed, Jesus bears for all men of all ages because of what God wrought in him, in what he once said and did, suffered and achieved. In other words, the New Testament confronts us not with *the historical Jesus*, but with *the kerygmatic Christ*, in whom God addresses a saving message to each individual, mediating it through this amalgam of interpretative traditions.⁶¹

Summarizing the views of the demythologizers, Bourke says that the message of the New Testament “is indeed ultimately rooted in the obscure historical events which culminated in Jesus’ crucifixion. But as it now stands it is a tissue of myths and legends woven by the first Christians. In many cases we can actually recognize the Jewish or pagan sources of this mythology. Yet it should not dismay us that this barrier of creative interpretation, which has been erected between us and the historical Jesus has proved impenetrable to the scientific historians of our time. We should recognize with courageous enlightenment that the historical Jesus is not only lost beyond recovery, but is also, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, *almost totally irrelevant* to the deeper meaning of the New Testament message.”⁶²

Bourke is not uncritical of Bultmann, yet he says, “Despite all the deeply false and heretical aspects of Bultmann’s theories, the entire Christian world should be grateful to him and to his pupils. Christians have learned from him to concentrate not on the external, material factuality, but on the deep theological meaning of Jesus.”⁶³

Gotthold Hasenhuettl of the Institute of Ecumenical Research at Tuebingen, on the other hand, is a confirmed disciple and apologist of Bultmann. He tells us in his essay “What Does Bultmann Mean by ‘Demythologizing’?”...

Today, after fifteen years, Catholic exegetes commonly accept that the representation of the world in the Scriptures must be seen in the perspective of the current mythical presentations of that time. On the very first page of the Bible the presentation of the world links up with that of the time. There are compartments of rain and snow, which can be opened; the earth emerges from the water and the water above the earth is separated from the water underneath it.⁶⁴

People today, Hasenhuettl declares, no longer think in mythical terms. Hence, the message of salvation must be presented in a way that corresponds to man’s present way of thinking. According to Hasenhuettl, “There is hardly a theologian or biblical scholar today who will deny this basic necessity of ‘demythologization’ if he wants to do justice both to the matter itself and to the man to whom salvation must be proclaimed.”⁶⁵

Not only the Old Testament has such a mythical framework according to the demythologizers. The New Testament, too, Hasenhuettl claims, is cast in this mold:

Also in the New Testament the presentation of the world as consisting of three layers is influenced by typical mythical features. This ancient concept of the world, molded by Jewish apocalyptic thought and gnostic myths of redemption has become alien to modern man. His thought has been trained by the natural sciences. The rain compartments of the sky have become an image of the past that he can no longer accept as true. Technological developments in every

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶⁴ *Concilium*, Vol. 14, p. 52.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

field, the discovery of atomic power, space travel—in brief, the way in which modern man experiences and controls the world makes it impossible for him to think any longer of heaven as “up there in space” or of hell as a place “underneath the earth.”⁶⁶

Those who are familiar with Bultmann’s *New Testament and Mythology* or Anglican Bishop John Robinson’s *Honest to God* will recognize these blasphemous caricatures of Biblical teaching. They stem from Bultmann and Tillich, whom Robinson popularized.

It should be noted, incidentally, that the word “myth” as used in the New Hermeneutic is not synonymous with “fairy tale.” Pius XII in his encyclical *Humani generis* declared, “These excerpts from current stories, which are found in the sacred books, must not be put on a level with mere myths, or with legend in general. Myths arise from the untrammled exercise of the imagination, whereas in our sacred books, even in the Old Testament, a love of truth and a cult of simplicity shine out.”⁶⁷

Hasenhuettl reminds us of Bultmann’s definition of myth: “*What is not of this world and divine is presented as of this world and human, and what belongs to the beyond is understood as belonging to this present.*”⁶⁸ This is based on a way of presentation that interprets the unexplained causes, the blank spots on the map of our life, not by unknown natural factors but by the intervention of the beyond, an intervention presented in the same way as our own behavior... It is in this context that we must understand Bultmann’s statement that the mythological way of speaking of the Bible is ‘incredible’ in the literal sense for modern man. Why? Because this mythical picture of the world is a thing of the past. The preaching of the New Testament had to be in terms of that age. That age is gone, and so is the language which that age in fact used to express itself.”⁶⁹

Hasenhuettl believes, with Bultmann, that the Bible must be demythologized in order to get at the intended truth, the kerygma, or the message behind the image. He faces the question: “How do we decide whether a given statement is part of the world picture or of the intended truth?” His answer is Bultmann’s: “The criterion by which we separate the world picture from the kerygma is, according to Bultmann, the possible relevance to *man’s existence*. A theological statement is not mythical if it is at the same time an anthropological statement. This criterion is rooted in the encounter with God’s Word and with man, and, therefore, in the truth of the *incarnation*. Ever since this action of God, says Karl Rahner, every theological statement has become at the same time an anthropological statement.”⁷⁰

Here again we see the existentialist influence. Whatever does not have the character of an encounter does not belong to the revelation of God and to the kerygma. Hasenhuettl expresses the hope that “both Catholic and Protestant exegetes will take up the *unsolved questions* in Bultmann’s demythologization and that their work will lead to a solution that does justice to the scriptural witness of the faith and makes the Good News more acceptable to modern man”!⁷¹

Catholic theologians may, indeed, debate these questions of how to interpret the Scriptures back and forth, but they dare never forget that Rome still insists on having the last word. Article 10 of Chapter II of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation makes this very clear: “The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.”⁷² Chapter III issues the reminder: “All of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.”⁷³ Laymen also are obliged to accept the teachings of the Church: “With ready Christian obedience, laymen as well as all

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Hasenhuettl, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁶⁸ See Hans Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth, A Theological Debate* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 10.

⁶⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 57f.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁷² *Documents*, pp. 117f.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

disciples of Christ should accept whatever their sacred pastors, as representatives of Christ, decree in their role as teachers and rulers in the Church.”⁷⁴ The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* says similarly, “Catholic teaching holds that the interpreter must follow the teaching authority of the Church.”⁷⁵

In direct contrast to this, our Lutheran, Biblical position is that Scripture interprets itself. “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path,” the Psalmist writes (119:105). God’s Word does not leave us in the dark as to its meaning. It is wonderfully clear. It is clear in itself, objectively. It will also become clear to us individually and personally as we search it diligently and reverently, humbly permitting Scripture to explain Scripture.

Luther stressed this hermeneutical principle in the familiar words that Scripture is *sui ipsius interpres*.⁷⁶ This does not mean that every one is free to interpret Scripture as he pleases. No one is at liberty to read his own interpretation into a passage. “No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation,” Peter reminds us (II Pet. 1:20). It is pertinent here also to recall Luther’s comment, “The Holy Spirit is the most simple writer and speaker in heaven and earth; therefore His words have only one sense, the most simple one, which we call the literal sense.”⁷⁷ Woe unto us if we ever permit human reason, human judgment, or ecclesiastical authorities to determine the meaning and sense of God’s holy Word for us! Those who are governed by such considerations in interpreting the Bible not only subvert the Biblical doctrine of the clarity of the Holy Scriptures, but also substitute the authority of men for the authority of God!

III. The Use of the Bible

A rather remarkable change has taken place in Rome’s attitude toward the use of the Bible by the laity. During the Middle Ages certain restrictions were put on the reading of the Bible. In 1199 Innocent III declared that reading of the Bible without the supervision of the duly appointed priest was not to be tolerated. A priest had to be present to interpret the Bible.

The Synod of Toulouse in 1229 forbade the laity to have the books of the Bible, with the exception of the Psalter, the breviary, and the *horas beatae Mariae*. The Council of Trent established a commission to prepare an *Index librorum prohibitorum et expurgandorum*. Pius IV in 1564 laid down ten rules to guide the commission, the *congregatio indicis*. The fourth rule required the laity to obtain written permission from the bishop to read the Bible in the vernacular. Even then, the translation had to be one made by Catholic writers. The rule added, “But whosoever shall presume to read these Bibles or have them in possession without such permit shall not be capable of receiving absolution for their sins, unless they have first given up their Bibles to the ordinary [the bishop].”⁷⁸

It is not difficult to see why many lay people concluded that the safest course for them to follow would be not to own a Bible of any kind. Rome never issued an absolute prohibition of the reading of the Bible by the laity, but it did everything it could to discourage it!

This attitude toward Bible reading explains also why Rome objected to the work of the Bible Societies, which were established to publish the Bible without note or comment and to distribute it as widely as possible. Pope Gregory XVI in his encyclical *Inter Praecipuas* of May 8, 1844, declared, for example, “Among the chief machinations by which in our times non-Catholics of various denominations try to ensnare Catholic believers and turn their minds away from the holiness of their Faith, a prominent place is held by the Bible Societies. These societies, first instituted in England and since extended far and wide, we now behold in battle array, conspiring to translate the books of divine Scripture into all the popular languages, to issue immense numbers of

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁷⁵ Vol. II, p. 514.

⁷⁶ Erlangen edition, *Opera Latina*, 36:160-161.

⁷⁷ WA, VII: 650, 21f.

⁷⁸ Carl Mirbt *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papsttums und des Römischen Katholizismus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1911), p. 260.

copies, to spread them indiscriminately among Christians and heathen, and to entice every individual to read them without guidance.”⁷⁹

In striking contrast to this frontal attack on the Bible Societies is the new spirit of friendly, limited interest, at least, in their work. Evidence of this is found in the American Bible Society’s News Release of September 10, 1968, reporting on a meeting in which the worldwide work of the United Bible Societies for the coming year was planned. “A Consultant at one session,” the Release informs us, “was the Rev. Walter M. Abbott, S. J., Assistant to His Eminence Cardinal Bea of the Vatican.” While one could not go so far as to say that Rome is now cooperating with the existing Bible Societies, it no longer condemns them as severely as it formerly did.

What did Vatican II have to say concerning the use of the Bible? Chapter VI of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation has the title “Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church.” In Article 22 we read: “Easy access to sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful.”⁸⁰ MacKenzie remarks in a footnote: “This is perhaps the most novel section of the Constitution. Not since the early centuries of the Church has an official document urged the availability of the Scriptures for all.”⁸¹ Article 25 of the Dogmatic Constitution also states, “This sacred Synod earnestly and specifically urges all the Christian faithful, too, especially the religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the ‘excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Philemon 3:8). ‘For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’ [Jerome].”⁸²

In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, likewise, there is a new and commendable emphasis on the use of the Bible. It is to be read and explained in the public services. The reason given is that Christ “is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the church.”⁸³

Article 24 of this same Constitution also addresses itself to the use of the Bible in public worship:

Sacred Scripture is of paramount importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from Scripture that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration, and it is from Scripture that actions and signs derive their meaning. Thus if the restoration, process, and adaptation of the sacred liturgy are to be achieved, it is necessary to promote that warm and living love for Scripture to which the venerable tradition of both Eastern and Western rites gives testimony.⁸⁴

Article 35 of this same document again encourages the use of the Bible:

That the intimate connection between words and rites may be apparent in the liturgy:

1. In sacred celebrations there is to be more reading from Holy Scripture, and it is to be more varied and suitable.
2. Since the sermon is part of the liturgical service, the preferred place for it is to be indicated even in the rubrics, as far as the nature of the rite will allow; and the ministry of preaching is to be fulfilled with exactitude and fidelity. The sermon, moreover, should draw its content mainly from scriptural and liturgical sources. Its character should be that of a proclamation of God’s wonderful works in the history of salvation, that is, the mystery of Christ, which is ever made present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy.⁸⁵

And, finally, this thought is mentioned yet once again in Article 51:

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

⁸⁰ *Documents*, p. 125.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 125f.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 149f.

The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's Word. In this way a more representative portion of the Holy Scriptures will be read to the people over a set cycle of years.⁸⁶

The Council recognized that Rome has always given a place of special honor to the Vulgate. But, it added, "Since the word of God should be available at all times, the Church with maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books. And, if given the opportunity and the approval of Church authority, these translations are produced in cooperation with the separated brethren as well, all Christians will be able to use them."⁸⁷

Significant in this statement is the authority given to the original text. This, MacKenzie points out, is a practical consequence of the declaration by Pius XII in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*: "The original text has more authority and more weight than any translation, old or new." MacKenzie adds, "Modern-language versions therefore should by preference be made from that text, not from a preexisting translation."⁸⁸

It is to be noted, however, that the Council still continues to insist on the need for proper guidelines, comments, and explanations in the reading of the Scriptures. Article 25 of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation states, "It devolves on sacred bishops, 'who have the apostolic teaching,' to give the faithful entrusted to them suitable instruction in the right use of the divine books, especially the New Testament and above all the Gospels, through translations of the sacred texts. Such versions are to be provided with necessary and fully adequate explanations so that the sons of the Church can safely and profitably grow familiar with the sacred Scriptures and be penetrated with their spirit."⁸⁹

In other words, Rome still maintains that it cannot permit people to read the Bible without such explanations. The danger is too great that people might draw conclusions from what they read that will be at variance with the teachings of Rome. Rome still insists, therefore, on exercising a censorship over what its scholars write and its people read.

Bastiaan van Iersel of the Montfort Fathers, who holds a high academic post at the University of Nijmegen, writing on "The Book of the People of God," echoes the call for the reading of the Bible in conformity with the teachings of the Church when he says, "Following the line of tradition, this Word of the Scriptures must be adapted to the present, and, where necessary, be corrected and complemented. That personal reading of the Scriptures can be fruitful here, whether done individually or in a group, seems obvious. It is equally obvious that such "individual" reading must never be 'individualistic.' The ecclesial bearing of the scriptural text itself demands that it be read in conscious continuity with the People of God."⁹⁰

A New Catechism speaks of Scripture as "the household book of the Church." But it, too, emphasizes the necessity of official interpretation of the Scriptures. "If the book is separated from the Church, enormous difficulties arise. A vital bond is broken. This is the tragedy of the Reformation. Since the Church was denied its authority as the court guaranteed by the Spirit of God for the interpretation of the Bible, the word of God has been understood in the most diverse ways, and many ecclesial communities have sprung up, each with their own explanation."⁹¹

In his Response to the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Frederick C. Grant objects to the censorship which Cardinal Bea wants to see exercised when Bea warns the bishops and superiors in his book *The Study of the Synoptic Gospels* to "keep watch with great care over popular writing ... on biblical subjects."

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁹⁰ *Concilium*, Vol. 10, p. 38.

⁹¹ p. 323.

Of course, Grant says, the scholars must be responsible. “But to whom? To God, not merely the ecclesiastical authorities with their traditional interpretations.”⁹²

A novel departure is the section of the Constitution which envisages and encourages the establishment of Catholic Bible Societies: “Furthermore, editions of the sacred Scriptures, provided with suitable comments, should be prepared also for the use of non-Christians and adapted to their situation. Both pastors of souls and Christians generally should see to the wise distribution of these in one way or another.”⁹³

The concessions that Rome has made with respect to the use of the Bible were made reluctantly, we may be sure, but again Rome found itself in a position where it had little choice. In this modern age it is no longer possible to prevent people from reading the Bible. So the Council did the next best thing. Turning a somersault, it encouraged the reading of the Bible, while at the same time it attempted to safeguard its interest by requiring the use of approved versions containing the necessary explanations.

While these concessions are far from what we would like to see, we ought to rejoice over any greater use of the Scriptures among Catholics that may result. What practical effects the decisions of Vatican II have actually had on the use of the Bible in Catholic homes we are not in a position to determine. But we may be certain that God’s Word will not return unto Him void wherever it is used. Although the notes and comments may frequently mislead the reader, we venture the hope that some readers, at least, will pay more attention to what the text itself actually says than to the notes and comments.⁹⁴ The text, when it is faithfully translated, is the Word of God. In these words God Himself is speaking, and hence “they are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). We have every confidence that the Spirit of God will use them to accomplish His purpose wherever and whenever they are heard or read.

⁹² *Documents*, p. 132.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁹⁴ Even in the notes, at times, the truth can be detected by the thoughtful and discerning reader. Interesting is the comment in *The Jerusalem Bible* on Genesis 3:15, the first Gospel promise: “The Hebrew text, by proclaiming that the offspring of the serpent is henceforth at enmity with the woman’s descendants, opposes the human race to the Devil and his ‘seed,’ his posterity, and hints at man’s ultimate victory; it is the first glimmer of salvation, the *proto-evangelium*. The Greek version has a masculine pronoun (‘he,’ not ‘it’ will crush ...), thus ascribing the victory not to the woman’s descendants in general but to one of her sons in particular; the words of the Greek version therefore express the messianic interpretation held by many of the Fathers. The Latin version has a feminine pronoun (‘she’ will crush ...) and since, in the messianic interpretation of our text, the Messiah and his mother appear together, the pronoun has been taken to refer to Mary; this application has become current in the Church.”