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Addresses

Dei Verbum 35 years later; understanding the Word of God

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"It pleased God in His goodness and wisdom to reveal Himself and to make known the mystery of His will."

So begins the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), issued on November 18, 1965. *Dei Verbum* – which means "Word of God" in Latin – is one of the four foundational documents of the Second Vatican Council. And yet in some ways over the past 35 years, it's been a better-guarded secret than the "third secret of Fatima." Too many Catholics barely know it exists. And I hope we can begin to remedy that today, together.

Many of you will remember that Vatican II produced 16 texts, divided into four major constitutions, plus various decrees and declarations. *Dei Verbum*, written as a constitution, showed the bishops' esteem for the Word of God and the reverence in which they hoped all Christian believers would hold that Word. *Dei Verbum* stands at a crossroad. On the one hand, it served as an official seal of approval on decades of biblical research by Catholic scholars, some of whom operated under a cloud of suspicion for much of their academic careers. At the same time, it launched everyday Catholics on a scriptural revival unparalleled in the history of the Church.

Dei Verbum opens by explaining the basic flow of the process of Divine Revelation, which comes to fruition in the life of Jesus Christ, who "completed and perfected Revelation and confirmed it with divine guarantees" (n. 4). Since Jesus Christ is the definitive manifestation of God, the Council Fathers naturally say that "no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord, Jesus Christ" (n. 4).

Moreover, the bishops teach that "sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church" (n.10). In doing so, the council bypasses the old Protestant Reformation debate about "Scripture versus Tradition" to a more useful discussion of the Lord's desire to reveal Himself fully to His People – a process carried forward by *both* Scripture and Tradition.

This makes sense. In reality, Tradition came before Scripture, and the Church came before them both, because the writing of the New Testament didn't begin until some 15-20 years after the Lord's Death and Resurrection. The Gospel message was passed along through oral tradition first, and only later committed to written form. The *means* of transmission — whether oral or written — were secondary to the *goal* (revelation) and to *the receiver* of the revelation (God's People, the Church).

Obviously, the Scriptures didn't drop from heaven in final form. They took shape in and through the community of the Church, working under divine inspiration. And somewhat like the American Constitution, the Scriptures are not self-explanatory documents. They require "an authentic interpretation" — and that task "has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone" (n. 10). The bishops stress that "in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls" (n. 10).

Dei Verbum therefore offers a middle way between Protestant fundamentalism and secular rationalism in interpreting the Bible. It clearly teaches the divine inspiration of the sacred authors and, therefore, the inerrant quality of their writings. It says "that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to be confided to the sacred Scriptures" (n. 11). In that qualifying phrase, "for the sake of our salvation," we hear the Catholic response to modern rationalism, which denies the inerrancy of Scripture and even the need for salvation. But *Dei Verbum* also avoids a simple-minded literalism.

In response to fundamentalists and biblical literalists, *Dei Verbum* stresses the need for "carefully search[ing] out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of words" (n. 12). For Catholics, this comes through an analysis of "literary forms, for the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts and in other forms of literary expression" (n.12). *Dei Verbum*, then, follows the common sense wisdom of the great 16th century cardinal and historian Cesare Baronius, who reacted to the Galileo crisis of his day with the simple comment that, "The Scriptures tell us how to go to heaven — not how the heavens go."

Catholics hold that Scripture does not interpret itself. Obviously, it has great power and value for any reader. But to be fully understood, it needs both a scientific approach — the work of biblical scholars, along with experts in linguistics, history, archaeology and other fields — and also a final and authoritative voice. As *Dei Verbum* says, "for, of course, all that has been said about the manner of interpreting Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgment of the Church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the Word of God" (n. 12).

In my experience, relatively few Catholics make the mistake of biblical literalism. But quite a few in recent years have bought into a kind of rationalism, which tends to deny the historical truth of the Gospels or the possibility of miracles, including even the virginal conception and bodily resurrection of Jesus. And yet the healthy response to today's skepticism is not a reactionary swing to fundamentalism, which simply doesn't fit with 19 centuries of Catholic scholarship. Rather, the right path is the "middle road" of *Dei Verbum*, which gives proper weight to the scientific examination of Scripture, but insists that it be done from the perspective of faith and within the context of the Tradition of the Church.

Dei Verbum's most powerful passage may arguably be in its final chapter, which is devoted to the place of "Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church." It stresses that "the Church has always venerated the Body of the Lord, insofar as she never ceases, particularly in the Sacred Liturgy, to partake of the Bread of Life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ" (n. 21). In other words, for Catholics, there is no conflict between Word and Sacrament. Just the opposite. The Word leads to the Sacrament, and the Sacrament presupposes and is actually made present by the Word.

Dei Verbum strongly encourages that the Scriptures "be open wide to the faithful" (n. 22). One way this has been done over the centuries, say the Council Fathers, has been through the rendering of the Bible into the various languages of the human family "from the very beginning" of Church history (n. 22). Some historians might have us believe that Martin Luther gave us the first modern-language vernacular Bible. But that's simply not true. Other German versions came first. Luther's claim to fame was that his translation was a very well polished, literary German. At any rate, with both practical and ecumenical concerns in mind, the bishops in *Dei Verbum* call for translations to be undertaken "in a joint effort with the separated brethren," with ecclesiastical approval. One such successful effort has been the Common Bible, produced by a team of Protestant, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox scholars.

Another way the Church has listened to the Council's invitation to have the Scriptures "open wide to the faithful" is through the revised lectionary used for the liturgy. In this plan, the three Sunday readings rotate in a three-year cycle, covering all four Gospels, major passages from the epistles and significant portions of the Old Testament, especially the prophetic and historical books. The week-day lectionary is based on a two-year cycle, offering a broad exposure to portions of the Bible previously unread in the Liturgy. The arrangement is so good that a number of Protestant denominations have voluntarily adopted this lectionary. Not only are millions of Christians now being fed a very substantial diet at the table of God's Word, but it's happening to them at precisely the same moment, which suggests some hope for future unity.

Dei Verbum reminds teachers of religion and clergy of their duty to be formed in the knowledge and spirit of the Scriptures. In fact, the document urges all the faithful "forcefully and specifically" to grow in their faith "by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures" (n. 25). And to make their point, the bishops quote the great maxim of St. Jerome: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ."

In the United States, all of these conciliar teachings found people eager and ready to respond. Bible study courses are now standard in many American parishes. Our own archdiocesan Catholic Biblical School is a great example of how hungry people are for the Word of God. Today, it would be a rare Catholic high school graduate who hadn't studied the Bible for at least two years. Sunday preaching is also much more biblically based. The Catholic renaissance in Scripture, however, has also had its problems. At times, poorly prepared teachers have misled adults and young people alike. Elsewhere, lay people have not had good guidance from clergy and have wandered into fundamentalism. So what can we do to set things right?

First, I hope each of you will read at least a portion of the Bible every day – if you don't already. There's no need to read it cover to cover, or in any particular order. Just put yourself into contact with God's Word on a regular basis – as little as 15 minutes daily. Set a clear goal, and stick to it.

Second, once you've begun your biblical "immersion" program, try to pray at least some portion of the Divine Office, which we also know as the "Liturgy of the Hours," each day. I can't think of a healthier spiritual diet, since 90 percent of it is Sacred Scripture. Many so-called "Bible-believing" Christians are astonished to discover that our clergy and religious are *required* by Church law to pray this biblically based discipline daily. Obviously, start out small, by trying to celebrate Morning and Evening Prayer. Use one of the "hours" as part of a prayer-group activity or during a Holy Hour. See if your pastor might be willing to introduce or re-introduce Sunday Vespers as part of the parish schedule, at least during Advent or Lent. Pray Night Prayer with your spouse before going to bed.

Third, try to read some of the Early Fathers of the Church – the great scholars and saints of the first Christian centuries. The Early Fathers had a gift for seeing connections and meanings in the Word of God which elude many of our best theological minds today. And this is another reason to introduce yourself to the Divine Office, in which we not only pray, but also receive instruction from the masters of theology and spirituality, who are so often the Early Fathers.

Fourth, join a parish-based Bible study group . . . or at least one under Catholic auspices. If one doesn't exist, approach your pastor with the idea, and offer to take some responsibility for its organization and upkeep. If you don't have someone trained in the Scriptures to guide the project, make sure that you have good study aids: a good translation of the Bible – the Revised Standard Version, 1966 Catholic edition, is one of my favorites; along with a concordance; and solid Catholic commentaries. And again, if you can't find what you need at the parish level, consider signing up for our archdiocesan Catholic Biblical School, which has served the Church in northern Colorado so long and so well.

Above all, make your encounter with Scripture a real prayer and study experience, and not just a "sharing session." And make sure your methods of interpretation are firmly rooted in the teaching of the Church. Remember that if someone brings up a biblical passage that seems to contradict a doctrine of faith, either the passage is not being properly understood, or it's not being read in its full historical, literary or doctrinal context — so more homework is needed. Why am I sure of that? Because the same Holy Spirit who guided the writing of the Sacred Scriptures has likewise been the constant Guide of the Church in her work of expounding and defining Christian doctrine. In other words, God can't contradict Himself or allow the Church to contradict herself.

Fifth, be careful not to deny, in subtle ways, the centrality of Jesus Christ. Both as a priest and a bishop, I was really puzzled by the reaction to the Vatican's recent document *Dominus Iesus*, even in some Catholic circles. The response wasn't just negative — it was bitter. But *Dominus Iesus* doesn't say anything new. Take 20 or 30 minutes and actually read it. It teaches exactly the same message as Vatican II. It preaches exactly the same doctrine Catholics have always believed.

The Church teaches, and Catholics believe, that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the hopes and all the promises offered to mankind from the dawn of salvation history. There is no salvation outside Jesus Christ. I know that at times some of our Jewish friends get nervous about what they call "fulfillment talk." But "fulfillment talk" is at the core of the Christian message; we can't avoid it without doing violence to the Person and the Message which stand at the heart of Christianity. That's why, for instance, the U.S. bishops' committee which is charged with implementing the Catechism has insisted that catechetical texts not replace "B.C." and "A.D." with "B.C.E." and "C.E." Jesus Christ is at the center of human meaning and world history — and not to proclaim Him as lord is a failure in our Christian duty of evangelization.

Similarly, many Jews express concern about our designation of the New Testament's companion volume as "the Old Testament." With the best of intentions, some Christians have come up with alternatives like "the Hebrew Scriptures" or "the Jewish Bible." And I include myself on that list, because I've done the same thing. The problem is that these expressions are inaccurate. Significant portions of the so-called "Hebrew Scriptures" weren't originally written in Hebrew, but in Greek. In like manner, books in the would-be "Jewish Bible" did not in fact form part of the canon of the Hebrew text, but only of the Septuagint or Greek text. It might simply be better to let our Jewish friends know that, for us, "old" does not mean obsolete or useless, but venerable — that is, worthy of veneration.

Finally, recover the skills of apologetics. Apologetics, some of you will recall, is that branch of theology devoted to the explanation and defense of our faith. Far too many Catholics have fallen prey to all sorts of fundamentalist sects, because somebody used the "hook" of Sacred Scripture to convince the poorly catechized that biblical faith and Catholic doctrine are mutually exclusive. This is nonsense. So it's really important to familiarize yourself with the writings of some of the best Catholic apologists in the field today — women like Rhonda Chervin, Janet Smith and Joyce Little, men like Peter Kreeft, Patrick Madrid, Karl Keating and Father Peter Stravinskis,

St. Peter challenges his flock always "to be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in them" [1 Pt 3:15]. Apologetics is essential to our "faith-sharing." It is certainly not "anti-ecumenical" to explain what we believe and why we believe it, and to defend our beliefs when attacked. In fact, I see two wonderful results from apologetics, especially when it's biblically based. The first is evangelization: When we really know our faith, we tend to share it. The second is growth in Christian unity: When we explain our faith to other sincere Christians, misconceptions are replaced by truth. On the other hand, when the Catholic faith is misrepresented out of ignorance or malice, it's Christian charity and also our Christian duty to point out the errors and to call the erring person to a change of mind, heart and behavior.

So that's my list of "things to do," biblically speaking — at least for starters. It may sound challenging, but it is *not* daunting — not if we agree with the Epistle to the Hebrews that God's Word is "living and effective;" not if we really understand the gift God gave us in this remarkable document *Dei Verbum*.

Over the past 35 years, the biblical revival sparked by Vatican II has been an source of blessing and vitality for the whole Church — and it will continue to renew the hearts of believers for many years to come. After all, if it "pleased God . . . to reveal Himself" to us, shouldn't it equally please Him when we search the depths of that Revelation found in His Word and celebrated in His Church? Let me close this reflection with the words the Council Fathers used to conclude *Dei Verbum* 35 years ago:

So may it come that, by the reading and study of the sacred books "the Word of God may speed on and triumph" [2 Th 3:1] and the treasure of Revelation entrusted to the Church may more and more fill the hearts of men. Just as from constant attendance at the eucharistic mystery the life of the Church draws increase, so a new impulse of spiritual life may be expected from increased veneration of the Word of God, which "stands forever" [Is 40:8; cf. 1 Pt 1:23-25].

To which, I hope all of us at this conference, and throughout the Church in northern Colorado, will always be able to give a heartfelt "Amen".