



An Introduction to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65)

Part II: Section 1

Dei Verbum

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

Promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 18 November, 1965

1. Some background:

- One of four major Constitutions, arguably this is the most important. Everything else the Council affirms depends on the Church's position on divine Revelation: If that cannot be believed, how can anything else? More than that: *"Among the four (Conciliar Constitutions), I maintain that Dei Verbum deserves to be considered a 'first among equals'. The reason is simple. Unless God has revealed himself fully through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, then the Church is without foundation and the liturgy a merely human construct"* (Robert Imbelli, *Rekindling the Christic imagination*, xiv-xv).
- A draft-text was debated at all four sessions of the Council, making it one of the most contested subjects addressed by the Council Fathers; it dealt with issues which had surfaced at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century and which were even more acute in the climate of the day.
- There were two different approaches as to the nature and means of Revelation: one maintained two sources (as affirmed at the Council of Trent): namely, Tradition and Scripture; the other that there was only one source: namely, Scripture.
- Pope John XXIII (who called himself the pope of those who pressed the accelerator and those who pressed the breaks!) used his authority to prevent the Council producing an unsatisfactory text and set up a "mixed commission"; this was to be chaired jointly by the heads of the two major groups: Cardinals Ottaviani and Bea. Simply 'knocking their heads together'? No, far more deeply: affirming that both positions had something to contribute, and they should find the answer together.
- In an example of the 'both/and' of Catholic theology, the document affirms that there is indeed one source of Revelation – i.e. the WORD OF GOD – and two ways in which it is communicated – namely, through the Church's oral, ongoing-TRADITION and her written SCRIPTURES. The discernment regarding Revelation was entrusted to the authority of the Apostles and the Bishops, their Successors.
- In the face of contemporary scepticism and a particular understanding of language, other questions revolved around how biblical texts could in any sense be held to be true.
- The final text, approved by 2,344 votes to 6, was promulgated just three weeks before the end of the Council.

2. The Issues:

- What is divine Revelation and what is it for?
- Is there one source of Revelation or two?
- What is the relationship between Scripture and Tradition?
- Who has the authority to interpret Revelation and how is this done?
- What is the historical truth of the four versions of the Gospel?
- What is the place of Scripture in the life of the Church and of each of her members?

3. The Document: One of the shortest of the whole Council, it comprises six chapters.

Introduction

Chapter 1. Revelation itself

Chapter 2. The Transmission of Divine Revelation

Chapter 3. Sacred Scripture: Its divine inspiration and its interpretation

Chapter 4. The Old Testament

Chapter 5. The New Testament

Chapter 6. Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church.

4. Six affirmations of Dei Verbum (See Weigel, George, *To Sanctify the World*, pgs 124-125)

1. The Gospels are reliable presentations of the truths taught by Jesus Christ;
2. The Bible is a unity;
3. The New Testament is most fruitfully read 'through' the prism of the Old Testament;
4. The Bible belongs to the whole Church, not just to clergy and scholars;
5. Biblical preaching offers the people of the Church an encounter with the living Word of God and empowers them for mission;
6. Tradition helps us read Scripture thoughtfully such that, as Tradition develops, so does the Church's understanding of Scripture.

"Through these affirmations, the Second Vatican Council both

- affirmed the **reality of divine Revelation** and
- positioned Scripture as an **integral part of the Church's evangelising mission.**"

5. Revelation and Mission

Dei Verbum (#1) makes its own the opening words of the First Letter of St John:

**"Hearing the Word of God with reverence, and proclaiming it with faith,
(this Council) assents to the words of Saint John:**

***'We proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father
and was made manifest to us***

***– that which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you,
so that you may have fellowship with us;***

and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ'

(1 Jn 1:2-3)"

Saint Paul also makes this link between Scripture and mission: the problem (for him and for us) is not whether others believe, but whether we have preached the word of God to them:

"For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting.

For necessity is laid upon me.

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16).

In other words: "The truths bequeathed to the Church in divine Revelation call the Church into mission, for these truths about human nature and human community are meant to be shared with others for the sanctification and salvation of the world" (Weigel, *ibid*).

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Dei Verbum affirms the fundamental truths of our faith: that in and from God, we are called to be one. As St Paul says, "*All this is from God*" (2 Corinthians 5:18):

Creation is God's first word of love to us,
since out of this immense love and merely because it pleased him to do so,
God created the human race in order to draw us all
into **PARTICIPATION** in his own **Trinitarian Life**.
His desire for us is that we live a holiness of being, of belonging and of behaviour;

The Father foretold this one plan in the Old Testament
and brought it to completion in the New Testament,
in his Son Incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, born of the Virgin Mary.
Under the action of the Holy Spirit,
the Son revealed the Father in his Person, his words and his deeds,
in his passion and death for the forgiveness of sins,
and in his resurrection and ascension.

This **PARTICIPATION** or sharing in the very life of God is the source
of our mysterious **COMMUNION** with him and with each other
in the mystery of the Church;
it is available to us in the transforming grace of her sacraments;
it is also the source of the **MISSION** given to each one of us
to announce these truths and this immense gift of God
to the whole of creation
until the end of time.

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Conclusion: Christianity is not a "religion of the book", but of a Person

From beginning to end, Christianity is about the revelation of God as Person, not as power or abstract force. To the Jews, he revealed both himself and his desire for a personal relationship with each and every human being.

This revelation is brought to completion in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, who ultimately and definitively 'drew back the veil' on the mystery of God's inner being, revealing that God is Three-fold Person in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The desire of the Blessed Trinity was always and only to draw each one into a mystery of Communion of Life, Love and Truth.

This is made available to everyone in the Mystery of the Church, through her sacraments and her teachings. It is there that, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, we truly encounter Jesus, the Risen and Living Lord, and in him, the Father.

No other religion makes or has ever made such claims as these.

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