

"Vatican II's declaration *Dei Verbum* has proven to one of the most important and lasting actions of the Council, injecting new life and vigor into the biblical renewal of the Catholic Church. Ronald Witherup, SS, is, as he notes, a 'product' of this renewal—becoming a noted Catholic voice in the interpretation of the Scriptures. His dedication and skill are on display here as he provides an in-depth but very accessible commentary on the Council's statement and lays out its meaning for the life of the Church today."

—Donald Senior, CP
President Emeritus and Professor of New Testament
Catholic Theological Union

"Vatican Council II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* was a life-changer for the twentieth-century church. In this splendid little volume, *The Word of God at Vatican II: Exploring Dei Verbum*, Fr. Ron Witherup tells us how it came about, what it said, and some of what happened as a result. It's a must-read for every religious educator in the English-speaking world."

—Raymond F. Collins
Department of Religious Studies
Brown University

"Ron Witherup's book on *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II's dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, is a gem. He provides, in effect, a clear and accessible 'exegesis' of a document whose import and impact continue fifty years later. In addition, Fr. Witherup sets *Dei Verbum* in its historical context and offers practical suggestions for its ongoing appropriation. I highly recommend this book, especially for Bible study groups and parish education classes."

—Thomas D. Stegman, SJ
Associate Professor of New Testament
Boston College School of Theology & Ministry

"In order to deepen both our relationship to Scripture, and to God, we must understand what we read and pray with. As a writer and speaker, I often refer to *Dei Verbum*, frequently urging others to study this essential document as a way of deepening their understanding of Sacred Scripture. In this treasure of a book, Ronald Witherup, SS, offers those who are familiar with *Dei Verbum*, as well as those who are just beginning, new and important insights into the Word of God."

—Fran Rossi Szpylczyn
Catholic writer and lay minister
Albany, New York

“Ronald Witherup’s treatment of the great Constitution on Divine Revelation provides the reader with an excellent tour of one of the most important church documents of the last five hundred years. It’s both scholarly and yet very accessible. For teachers, preachers, and pastoral ministers, this book is essential reading because it embraces so fully the central role of the inspired Word of God in the life of today’s Church.”

—Bill Huebsch

Author of *The Spiritual Wisdom of Saint John XXIII*

“A book for all seasons—but especially today! As our commitment to hearing and living the Word of God deepens and as we continue to comprehend the treasure, ramifications, and challenges of the Second Vatican Council, Fr. Witherup takes us on a journey of understanding and appreciation of Scripture and one of the Council’s foundational documents, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, a journey that is unequalled. A survey of the history, the meaning, and implications of *Dei Verbum*, as well as practical suggestions for the future, are succinctly summarized with comprehensive clarity and fervent fidelity. This book is ideal for individual and group reflection and study, and then needs to be kept on a near-by bookshelf for continual reference.”

—Janet Schaeffler, OP

Author, Retreat and Adult Faith Formation Facilitator

The Word of God at Vatican II

Exploring *Dei Verbum*

Ronald D. Witherup, SS



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In Memory of
Saint John XXIII
(b. 1881; pope, 1958–1963)

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This book came into being at the invitation of Little Rock Scripture Study, with whom I have had the privilege of working for many years on various projects, most recently, the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*.

I congratulate Little Rock Scripture Study (LRSS) on its fortieth anniversary (2014) and express my sincere gratitude for all they have done to foster an authentic ministry of the Word in the Diocese of Little Rock and far beyond. They have admirably fulfilled the vision of *Dei Verbum* (DV) that called for the broad dissemination of the word of God through excellent resources (DV 25). I have always respected their professionalism and their dedication to promoting the word of God. I sincerely thank the director of LRSS, Catherine “Cackie” Upchurch, who read through the manuscript with a helpful eye and also provided a separate booklet of study questions for those who want to explore the topic in more depth. I thank also the rest of the staff of LRSS: Lilly Hess, Cliff Yeary, Sister Susan McCarthy, RDC, and Nancy Lee Walters. Along with Cackie, they make a wonderful team! I am also grateful to Bishop Anthony B. Taylor of Little Rock, and his farsighted predecessors, for recognizing the value of this important ministry in his diocese and for supporting its dissemination far and wide.

As the reader will note, I dedicate this book to the memory of Saint John XXIII, “Good Pope John” as he was often called. He courageously oriented the church toward the third Christian millennium by convoking the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), the golden anniversary of which we are celebrating (2012–15). His bold pastoral vision of a “new Pentecost” for the church, rooted in the Sacred Scriptures, also helped give direction to the document explored in this book. In fact, as will be recounted later in chapter 1, one can say he almost “conceived” the constitution by one bold action.

I add two practical comments about this book. Although there are no footnotes in it, the text of *Dei Verbum* does have forty-one footnotes, which are included with the text of the constitution. These have been assembled as endnotes at the end of chapter 2 and may be consulted as needed. I have also included a glossary of important terms at the end of the book. The first occurrence of these words in the text is marked with an asterisk (*).

Finally, I must express some words of appreciation to those who helped with the final production of this book. I am enormously grateful to the entire staff at Liturgical Press for their constant support and expert guidance, especially Peter Dwyer, Barry Hudock, Andy Edwards, Colleen Stiller, Stephanie Nix, Stephanie Lancour, and Michelle Verkuilen. Also deserving my gratitude for numerous favors and for his friendship over the years is Father John R. Donahue, SJ, who graciously read the manuscript with care, gave me many helpful pointers, and saved me from a few gaffes. I alone, however, am responsible for any shortcomings.

May the word of God flourish and help bring peace to the earth!

R.D.W.

Memorial of Saint Jerome, 2013

A Brief History of *Dei Verbum*

If, as the saying goes, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” then an image from the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) may provide an inspiring starting point for this book. Each of the four sessions of the council saw the procession and enthronement of a fifteenth-century book of the gospels in the midst of the council fathers when they met in plenary session, in accordance with an ancient practice from the fifth century AD. When Pope Paul VI attended such sessions, he carried the ornate book himself. There is no more powerful symbol of the centrality of the word of God in the life of church. In the very presence of the sacred word of God—representing the living Word himself, Jesus Christ—the council fathers undertook the arduous task of an ecumenical* council to confront the needs of the modern world. The inspired word of God would rekindle the spark of the Catholic faith in the mid-twentieth century. The harbinger of this new hope founded on Sacred Scripture was a rather short document, a dogmatic* constitution on the concept of divine revelation, which was one of the last documents to be approved by the council but which would breathe new life into the role the Scriptures would play in the Catholic Church for generations to come.

Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, is without doubt one of the most important teachings to come out of Vatican Council II. It is one of four “constitutions”—and only two *dogmatic* constitutions—the ecumenical council issued. It consequently holds the highest level teaching authority (magisterium*) in the church. The document also has one of the most interesting origins among the documents of the council. Before addressing this history, though, a word about the text itself is essential.

The Text of *Dei Verbum*

There is no final, definitive text of *Dei Verbum* in English. The official text is in Latin, as is the case with all the documents of the council. Some church authorities have called for a definitive translation into various modern languages, but that would pose a challenge. Let me use the analogy of the Bible to explain why. Just as the Bible needs to be studied in the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) with modern translations updated from time to time, so such crucial ecclesial documents as these, which come from an ecumenical council, can benefit from periodic retranslation. As time moves on, comprehension of such important texts that touch the identity of the church can change and be profoundly deepened. Professional commentaries exist that recount almost word for word the formation of *Dei Verbum*. These resources help us to understand the constitution in its original context as it was being framed. Revisiting this analysis from time to time can only be, in my judgment, beneficial. So insisting on a *definitive* modern translation would likely be ineffective, since the original must be consulted anyway.

Be that as it may, dealing with the Latin original cannot totally be avoided. Thus, I will occasionally point out specific Latin terms that help us understand the profound teaching of this document. We might remember that not only were the documents of Vatican II written in Latin but virtually all the presentations given during the council were also delivered in Latin, a language many bishops could barely understand as an oral or conversational language. (Needless to say, Latin experts had a lot of work behind the scenes functioning as translators!) One exception was Maximos IV Sayegh (1878–1967), the patriarch of the Greek Melkite Church, who insisted on addressing the council in French, and who made several highly influential interventions during the council. His reason is interesting. He maintained that Latin was not the language of the *universal* church but of the Roman church of the West, the Latin Rite. Other Catholic rites use diverse languages in their rituals, such as Greek, Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian, among others. In any case, the final text of *Dei Verbum* is in Latin and must be understood from this perspective. In this book, we will keep such references to a minimum in contexts where the proper sense of *Dei Verbum* seems to require an understanding of the Latin text. Also, whenever necessary, the reader can consult the glossary in the back of the book to refresh one's memory of unfamiliar terminology.

As regards English translations that are available, no one text can be said to be the best. Several good ones are recommended, as mentioned in the “Further Reading” section at the conclusion of this book. The Vatican website (www.vatican.va) also offers a useful one that is easily available. For convenience, this book uses the Austin Flannery edition, which has been inserted into the text by numbered paragraphs. Unless otherwise noted, it is the translation cited. With the publisher’s permission, I have made only minor corrections to this text, mainly corrections of typos or evident grammatical errors. Now to a synopsis of the history.

Concise History of Dei Verbum

Originally titled “A Schema* of a Dogmatic Constitution on the Sources of Divine Revelation,” the first draft of the document offered to the council fathers (that is, the bishops) during the first session of the council in the fall of 1962 was drafted by a preparatory theological commission dominated by officials from Roman congregations or dicasteries* (the Curia*). This draft consisted of five chapters, outlined in the chart below.

Schema of first draft, On the Sources of Revelation (Latin, <i>De Fontibus Revelationis</i>)	
Chap. 1	The Double Sources of Revelation
Chap. 2	The Inspiration, Inerrancy, and Literary Form of Scripture
Chap. 3	The Old Testament
Chap. 4	The New Testament
Chap. 5	Holy Scripture in the Church

The drafters assumed that the council fathers would simply adopt such a document, perhaps with minor modifications or suggestions for improvements. To everyone’s surprise, numerous council fathers, including the elderly and widely respected cardinal Archbishop Achille Liénart from Lille (France), spoke strongly against the draft. They boldly called for it to be taken off the table and to be entirely reworked. They viewed both the tone and content of the document as problematic. A young theologian

by the name of Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, who served as an expert advisor (Latin, *peritus**) at the council was one who privately expressed the discontent. He pointed out the excessively negative and defensive tone of the document and its lack of theological finesse.

I must note here that more recent scholarship on *Dei Verbum* has shown that the initial negative reaction of some council fathers to the first draft (technically called a "schema") of the constitution may have been due in part to a prejudgment and an exaggerated fear of the influence of the Roman officials who had formulated it. An examination of *De Fontibus Revelationis* has shown that it was perhaps a bit more nuanced than was recognized. Nevertheless, the fact remains that many council fathers strongly opposed the first schema and wanted it entirely redrafted.

As a result, there was no way the draft could get the required two-thirds vote to pass. Neither could the opponents muster a two-thirds majority to remove it for redrafting. For a week it looked as if the council would hit a major roadblock in its infant stages. Then the next day, unexpectedly, Pope John XXIII himself intervened, something he was most reluctant to do and, in fact, rarely did during the council. The pope announced that the draft would indeed be sent back for major reworking. To this end, he appointed two cardinals, who happened to be on opposite theological poles regarding the document, to lead a special "mixed" commission to hammer out an entirely new text to bring back to the council fathers. One was Italian Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani (1890–1979), head of the Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) and also head of the Doctrinal Commission that had drafted the first schema. The other was German Cardinal Augustin Bea (1881–1968), head of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (now the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity) and a biblical scholar. The opposing forces could scarcely have been better represented. Yet both had to work together, along with some other council fathers and experts, to come up with a new, more acceptable draft constitution. In this sense, one can say John XXIII almost "created" this document by his bold action.

The entire process of drafting a new dogmatic constitution on revelation would be very complicated and not be completed until the last session of the council in the fall of 1965. The constitution went through various other drafts and was subjected to many amendments over the next three years before it would finally be approved by a resounding affirmative vote on November 18, 1965, scarcely before the council itself ended on December 8, 1965. All parties recognized that the final dogmatic

constitution was in many ways a compromise document. It shows a lot of give-and-take, which means that one can sometimes find justification in it for positions that are at least in tension, if not outrightly opposed to one another. That being said, *Dei Verbum* is nonetheless a *dogmatic* constitution adopted by an ecumenical council and promulgated by Pope Paul VI. It thus constitutes the church's highest teaching authority on the theme of divine revelation. Moreover, its less doctrinal focus and more pastoral tone more closely matched the design of the council as expressed by John XXIII, who had convened the council. It also influenced every subsequent church teaching on Scripture to the present, an issue we will examine more closely in chapter 3.

Comparing the outline of the final dogmatic constitution (with paragraph numbers in parentheses) and the first edition, as placed side by side in the chart below, helps to clarify what some of the problems with the earlier draft were.

A Comparison of the First and Final Drafts

Schema of first draft <i>De Fontibus Revelationis</i>		Schema of final document <i>Dei Verbum</i>	
(On the Sources of Revelation)		(The Word of God)	
		Prologue (1)	
Chap. 1	The Double Sources of Revelation	Chap. 1	Divine Revelation Itself (2–6)
Chap. 2	The Inspiration, Inerrancy, and Literary Form of Scripture	Chap. 2	Transmission of Divine Revelation (7–10)
		Chap. 3	Sacred Scripture: Its Divine Inspiration and Interpretation (11–13)
Chap. 3	The Old Testament	Chap. 4	The Old Testament (14–16)
Chap. 4	The New Testament	Chap. 5	The New Testament (17–20)
Chap. 5	Holy Scripture in the Church	Chap. 6	Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church (21–26)

Four differences are quite telling. First, the final title does not mention “sources” for divine revelation, which had clearly implied that Scripture and tradition* were two separate sources. In fact, the constitution would ultimately speak only of one source of God’s self-revelation that had two aspects, Scripture and tradition, viewed as intimately interrelated.

A second observation is that the final version begins in a much more personal way. The addition of an introductory prologue, with a biblical citation from the First Letter of John, orients the constitution in a highly personalistic direction. Some interpreters see in this prologue an orientation for the entire council, even though *Dei Verbum* was one of the last documents to be adopted. It speaks about divine revelation itself in terms of God’s outreach to humanity, an act of divine communication. It does not begin with a discussion of sources leading into a presentation of technical questions right away. This personal approach would also orient future discussions of revelation and Scripture for many decades to our own day.

Third, we note that *Dei Verbum* contains no mention in the chapter headings of “inerrancy,”* though the topic is discussed in chapter 3 of the constitution. The earlier draft had essentially jumped quickly to the notions of inspiration,* inerrancy, and literary form to bolster the truth of Scripture narrowly understood, whereas *Dei Verbum* would nuance these ideas considerably. It avoided altogether the word “inerrancy” in favor of a more refined discussion of how the Holy Spirit preserves the message of Scripture from error.

Finally, with the addition of a prologue and a more subtle presentation of the last three chapters on the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the role of Scripture in the church’s life, *Dei Verbum* emphasized its pastoral focus, a hallmark of the council. From the beginning of the council, with John XXIII’s opening address titled *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* (Mother Church Rejoices), the goal of orienting the church’s conciliar teaching in a pastoral way was evident. *Dei Verbum* embodies this pastoral approach. (“Pastoral” here does not mean lightweight, insignificant, or without doctrinal content; it refers to the pope’s goal of reaching out to the modern world to help the faith to be understood better.)

What does this history tell us? It bears testimony to the complex process of ecumenical councils, of which there have only been twenty-one in the history of the church, starting with the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325). (In this context “ecumenical,” from Greek *oikoumenē*, means universal rather than interdenominational.) It also demonstrates both the

continuity and distinctiveness of Vatican II in relation to other councils. *Dei Verbum* issues no condemnations (the technical word “anathema”*) of errors or critiques of other Christian denominations, nor does it proclaim any new dogmas. It calmly, directly, clearly, and pastorally presents a Catholic understanding of the mystery of God’s self-revelation to humanity. In doing so, the council fathers desired to invite all the people of God to eat and drink of the one table of divine nourishment, understood as Scripture and tradition in their deepest meaning. The lack of a defensive and aggressive tone helps make the constitution more inviting. While *Dei Verbum* clearly stands in continuity with prior church teaching on the topic of revelation, notably the Council of Trent (1546–63) and Vatican Council I (1869–70), it nonetheless charted a new course to steer the church into the challenging waters of modern life.

Influence of Church Documents on Dei Verbum

Virtually all church documents have been influenced in one way or another by previous church teachings. *Dei Verbum* is no exception. The following chart gives a thumbnail sketch of the influence of certain key church documents on the final edition of *Dei Verbum* adopted at Vatican II on November 18, 1965, the anniversary of the publication of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical* letter *Providentissimus Deus* in 1893. A short narrative explanation follows.

Major Documents Influencing Dei Verbum

Document Title	Author	Date	Content	Influence on Dei Verbum
<i>Decretum Primum</i> On the Canonical Books <i>Decretum Secundum</i> On the Latin Vulgate	Council of Trent, fourth session	1546	Called for re- spect of both Scripture and the apostolic traditions of the church; estab- lished the limits of the Catholic canon* of Scrip- ture, both the Old and New Testaments,	DV 7, 9, 11

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Document Title	Author	Date	Content	Influence on <i>Dei Verbum</i>
			and gave precedence to Saint Jerome's Latin Vulgate* translation from the original languages	
<i>Dei Filius</i> Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith	Vatican Council I	1870	Defined the Scriptures as sacred literature inspired by the Holy Spirit, with God as their "author"	DV 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12
<i>Providentissimus Deus</i> Encyclical letter on Scripture study	Pope Leo XIII	1893	Cautiously promoted modern scientific study of Scripture while affirming the basic historicity of the biblical books	DV 11, 24
<i>Divino Afflante Spiritu</i> Encyclical letter on promoting biblical studies	Pope Pius XII	1943	Encouraged Catholic scholars to use modern historical critical methods* of Bible research and to pay attention to the original languages and literary forms in the Bible; usually considered the Magna Charta of modern Catholic biblical study	DV 11, 23

<i>Sancta Mater Ecclesia</i> Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels	Pontifical Biblical Commission	1964	Describes the gospel traditions as consisting of three levels: (1) historical life of Jesus (2) preaching of his first followers (3) the writings of the evangelists	DV 19 adopts some of the language and the threefold schema of the gospel traditions, while affirming the basic historicity of the gospels
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The Council of Trent (1546–63)

For modern Catholicism the Council of Trent looms large as a significant influence on the life of the church. It was the first council following the Protestant Reformation, and it initiated the Catholic reform that came to be known as the Counter-Reformation. In designing *Dei Verbum* the council fathers drew explicit attention to this council, along with Vatican I, to underline the continuity in Catholic teaching on revelation. But two observations help to keep this fact in perspective.

First, the teaching at Trent is relatively brief and in fact does not discuss revelation itself. Rather, that council finally settled the question of the extent of the “canon”* (from Greek *kanōn*, “norm”) of the Scriptures. For Catholics, the Old Testament consists of forty-six books, and the New Testament of twenty-seven books, for a total of seventy-three books of Sacred Scripture. (Protestants and Orthodox have a somewhat different list of canonical books.) Trent also underlined that God is the real “author” of the biblical books, and that the church has the definitive authority and obligation to oversee authentic interpretation of the Bible. It also gave priority to the Latin Vulgate edition of the Bible over the original languages.

Second, at the time of Vatican II scholarship on the Council of Trent had matured significantly. Previous narrow interpretations of Trent were shown to be exaggerated. Although the decrees at Trent conclude with anathemas, condemnations of those who would go contrary to the church’s teaching, modern scholarship showed that Trent was less rigid and more nuanced than had usually been presumed. On the question of

the “sources” of revelation, for instance, Trent never actually taught that there were two of them. It simply said that Scripture (both Old and New Testaments) and the oral or written traditions of the church on faith and morals should be recognized “with equal measure of piety and reverence” (Latin, *pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia* [First Decree, April 8, 1546]). Most important, however, is to recognize that Trent, in comparison to Vatican II, focused on the more “propositional” aspects of revelation rather than the personal. Uppermost at Trent was the content of the faith, rather than its relational aspects. *Dei Verbum* affirms these teachings, but then proceeds to nuance them with the personal, dynamic, and dialogical concepts that marked the final dogmatic constitution.

Vatican Council I (1869–70)

As the council closest to Vatican II (although almost one hundred years earlier!), one can easily understand why the council fathers chose to see themselves in continuity with it. Unlike Trent, Vatican I issued a constitution on faith that included a chapter on revelation. Basically, revelation was seen as God’s revealed truth, which was not dependent on human reason and which was entrusted to the church to safeguard and proclaim by its dogmas. Despite Vatican I’s opposition to rationalism,* the council did acknowledge the role human reason plays in allowing humans to comprehend God’s revealed truth preserved in the faith. The council had to adjourn early because of the Franco-Prussian War in Europe, so it never had a chance to completely finish its work.

Like Trent, Vatican I also had anathemas. Four condemnations were issued, and the tone is clearly an antimodern one, which saw dangers lurking in many modern concepts like evolution and rationalism. The concern was also to protect the church’s definition of the limits of the biblical canon and the authority of the Bible as God’s inspired word. The multiple references to Vatican I in *Dei Verbum* reinforce these basic perspectives. Thus, *Dei Verbum* also emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in safeguarding the truth of Scripture and affirms the church’s duty and right to uphold this truth.

The following chart gives a succinct comparison of these three ecumenical councils with regard to the teaching on revelation.

Comparison of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II on Revelation

Trent	Vatican I	Vatican II
Fourth Session, 1546	Third Session, 1870	Fourth Period, 1965
Title: No formal title, but concerned acceptance of the sacred books and apostolic traditions, and the role of the Latin Vulgate and means of interpretation	Title: <i>Dei Filius</i> (Son of God) On Revelation	Title: <i>Dei Verbum</i> (Word of God) Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation
Content: Revelation is not discussed as a separate topic; rather, two decrees set forth the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the definitive canon of Sacred Scripture for the church (46 books in the Old Testament; 27 books in the New Testament); • the priority of the Latin Vulgate; • the affirmation that God is the author of both Testaments, either by the preaching of Christ or the dictation of the Holy Spirit; • an emphasis on the church's definitive role in interpretation of the Scriptures and forbidding individual interpretation. 	Content: Revelation is discussed in chapter 2 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, most of which reiterates the basic teaching on Scripture from the Council of Trent.	Content: A dogmatic constitution fully devoted to the topic of divine revelation, discussed in an introduction and six chapters, covering the topics of revelation itself, the transmission of revelation, the divine inspiration of Scripture, the interrelationship of the Old and New Testaments, and the pastoral role of the Scriptures in the life of the church.

Table continued on page 12

Anathemas and restrictions placed within the context of the two decrees, including restricting what biblical texts, with notes and/or interpretations, printers may print	Supplemented by four anathemas: (1) Against those who deny that God can be known through human reason and the created order; (2) Against those who deny the necessity of learning about God and the importance of worshipping; (3) Against those who affirm human self-development rather than acknowledging that God elevates human beings to divine perfection; (4) Against those who deny the canonical authority of all the books of the Old and New Testaments.	No anathemas
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Reproduced with minor changes from Ronald D. Witherup, *Scripture: Dei Verbum* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 43.

Providentissimus Deus (Nov. 18, 1893)

Although Pope Leo XIII (1810–1903) is better known for his encyclical letter on social justice, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), his encyclical letter on biblical studies, *Providentissimus Deus*, also exercised broad influence. The pope basically wanted to address in a formal way the scientific and literary developments that were happening in the nineteenth century and that had clearly been impacting interpretation of the Bible. One should keep in mind that some of these developments were dramatic. The nineteenth century was, after all, a century of enormous scientific and industrial progress but also a time of doctrinal anxiety in the Catholic Church that would lead to the “antimodernism” of the early twentieth century (see modernism* in the glossary).

Archaeology was beginning to make inroads in the Holy Land, for instance, with ramifications for biblical studies. Moreover, knowledge of

the ancient biblical languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and cognate languages—was also blossoming. Then there were also studies of literary forms found in the Bible and in antiquity that were beginning to impact biblical interpretation. Leo XIII addressed all these in his rather cautious encyclical. Although he was worried about the negative impact of many “modern” ideas on church teaching, he also wanted to encourage Catholic scholars to take advantage of new developments that might aid the proper, and more sophisticated, interpretation of Scripture. Thus, his encyclical letter basically encouraged Catholic biblical scholars to take advantage of these new techniques and apply them judiciously in ways that would promote better comprehension of the biblical message among Catholics.

Divino Afflante Spiritu (Sept. 30, 1943, Memorial of Saint Jerome)

Pope Pius XII, like his predecessors from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also harbored some fears about modern developments and how they could negatively influence the faith. Yet when he wrote this encyclical on biblical studies, published on the feast of Saint Jerome, patron saint of biblical scholars, he took a rather nuanced and balanced position. On the one hand, he repeated the church’s teaching about the truth of the Scriptures, their inspired nature, their usefulness for Catholic spiritual and moral teaching, and the role of the Holy Spirit as guarantor of truth.

The pope, on the other hand, also recognized the great potential in the modern sciences for aiding the better comprehension of the Scriptures as ancient documents. Thus, his encyclical encouraged Catholic scholars to use all the modern means available, such as archaeology, literary and linguistic studies, to explore the Scriptures and advance biblical exegesis.* This balanced approach finds its way into *Dei Verbum* and helped give the dogmatic constitution its refined orientation to the question of biblical interpretation.

Sancta Mater Ecclesia (Apr. 21, 1964)

A teaching of the Pontifical Biblical Commission that exercised a direct influence on the final formulation of *Dei Verbum* was *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, the Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels. Several points are noteworthy in this regard.

First, note that the instruction was issued in 1964, that is, while the council was still in process! Behind the scenes there had been many discussions going on among biblical experts, theologians, and council fathers over certain aspects of Scripture and how they would be addressed by the constitution being drafted. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, at that time a teaching arm of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued this instruction with an eye to helping give some direction to the council fathers.

The second point is that *Dei Verbum* actually adopts the literal title of the Biblical Commission document, for the first words of paragraph 19 in Latin are “*Sancta Mater Ecclesia*” (Holy Mother Church). One could hardly miss the affirmation that this implies in accepting the basic teaching of the Biblical Commission.

The third and most important point is the impact this document had. Its primary teaching, that the four canonical gospels themselves consist of three different levels of “tradition,” and consequently are not necessarily eyewitness accounts of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, became enshrined in paragraph 19 of *Dei Verbum*, and later in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (126). The constitution explicitly acknowledges these three levels: the oral teaching of Jesus in history, the subsequent preaching of the apostles recounting the stories of Jesus, and the written testimony of the four evangelists who collected, organized, edited, and synthesized these oral and written traditions. This teaching explains why interpreters of the gospels must be careful to distinguish these levels of gospel tradition and not overstep the bounds of purely historical assertions. Note also, however, that *Dei Verbum* insists that this complex process of oral, written, and edited gospel traditions still preserves the “truth” of Scripture relating to Jesus and his teaching.

Finally, one can add that those who wish to affirm the literal historicity of the gospels in a way that denies this multilayered process do not have this option in Catholic teaching. Of course, the same paragraph of *Dei Verbum* affirms the basic historicity of the gospels. There is no room for asserting that they are fiction or simply made-up stories. They are based upon the ministry of Jesus. Over time, however, accretions crept into the text and the formulation of these traditions was influenced by developing Christian beliefs. One must always exercise caution when making historical claims about the “Jesus traditions,” which is one reason why biblical scholars continue to research the gospels carefully for kernels of history that are embedded there.

Other Influences

Many other influences helped to shape *Dei Verbum* that are not noted on the chart, since I have only highlighted the most evident and important. For instance, many church fathers and theologians are quoted or cited (Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, Irenaeus, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, etc.). There are also references to other councils of the church (Nicaea II, Fourth Council of Constance) and to the teachings of other popes (Pius XI, Benedict XV). Such citations are evidence that *Dei Verbum* should be seen in continuity with prior church tradition.

In addition, we should recall that several modern theologians marked the shape of the constitution and other council documents, most notably, Yves Congar (1904–95), Karl Rahner (1904–84), Henri de Lubac (1896–1991), Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88), Louis Bouyer (1913–2004), Edward Schillebeeckx (1914–2009), Gérard Philips (1899–1972), Hans Küng (b. 1928), Joseph Ratzinger (b. 1927), and others. Several scholars from the so-called “Louvain school” (Belgium), such as Gérard Philips, made particularly significant contributions to *Dei Verbum* and other council documents. Many scholars exemplified the perspective of the so-called *nouvelle théologie** (French, “new theology” [see also *theology** in the glossary]) that marked the European context so significantly by the middle of the twentieth century. The name “new theology” was given to this group of forward-thinking, French-speaking theologians in the 1940s—though they were not an organized group as such—in order to distinguish their progressive thought from the standard “Roman” theological approach (often called “manual” *theology** for the use of textbooks or manuals of instruction) that had been in place for centuries. Many of these theologians functioned as official experts (Latin, *periti*) or advisors to bishops throughout the council, and several had a direct hand in shaping the language of council documents. Paradoxically, this was almost a rehabilitation of the “new theology,” as it had earlier been condemned by Pope Pius XII’s encyclical letter *Humani Generis* (1950) as dangerous! What marked the style of this “new theology” was called *ressourcement** (French, “going back to the sources”). It constituted a return to biblical, patristic, and medieval theological traditions that was to stamp much of the theology of Vatican II. Paradoxically again, revisiting the church’s more ancient history in these earlier sources would significantly revitalize the church in the modern period.

We do not have the time or space to explore all these considerations in detail. The essential point is to understand the larger context out of which *Dei Verbum* was born. As with all church teachings, the constitution grew out of certain historical, cultural, and theological settings that helped to shape its final form. Part of the challenge and beauty of deepening our comprehension of this document is keeping such a rich background in mind.