

## Retrieving the Tradition

### “The Green Light to Renewal,” in *Melita Theologica* 26 (1974) 2-6

There is no doubt in the mind of any Catholic theologian today, or even in the mind of most Catholic priests or laymen, that Vatican II has been a most important landmark in the history of the Church and has introduced a long-awaited renewal in every aspect of the Church's life. Some of the changes brought about during these past ten years have been much more deeply rooted than they seem, coming as they do from a radical change in mentality and approach. There seems to be now a new atmosphere in the Church, a new vitality, a new hope and dynamism.

And we all know that Vatican II and Pope John XXIII are mostly responsible for all this. But how many Catholics, or even students of theology, have asked for the reason for such a sudden change? Such things do not happen all of a sudden. What was it, then, that has paved the way for Vatican II in the life of the Church? We all believe in the Holy Spirit as being alive in the Church of Christ and guiding her along the pilgrimage of time. But the Holy Spirit, with all his gifts and charisms, is no replacement for human wisdom and initiative, even in the Church of God.

When Pius XII issued his Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943 only a few Catholic theologians and biblical scholars did realize what its aftermath was going to be. This document, in fact, gave the green light for new methods and principles of interpreting the Holy Scriptures and thus opened fresh horizons for keen theologians and biblical scholars.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One may usefully read on this subject: Karl Rahner et al., *The Bible in a New Age* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1965); L. Alonso Schöckel, *Understanding Biblical Research* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963); Roderick Andrew F. MacKenzie, *Faith and History in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); P. Benoit, “Saint Thomas et l'inspiration des Ecritures,” in *Tommaso d'Aquino nel suo VII Centenario: Congresso Internazionale Roma-Napoli 17-24 Aprile 1974* (Rome: Angelicum, 1974), 115-132.

The importance of this document, which has already exerted its beneficial and refreshing influence in the Catholic Church for over thirty years, cannot be overestimated. Without *Divino Afflante* there would have been no *Dei Verbum*, and in fact there would have been no Vatican II with all the sixteen documents such as we know them today. For the renewal of biblical studies along the lines outlined by the Encyclical not only gave us a new biblical theology, but has sanctioned various points of doctrine in other theological fields such as dogmatic theology, liturgy, moral theology, pastoral theology and even Canon Law. It can thus be safely said that Vatican II has incorporated, systematized and solemnly sanctioned the crème of research in every field of theology during the twenty years that went between the Encyclical and the beginning of the Council itself. And now the Church of Christ and the People of God are benefiting from the fruits of both.

What are then the new directions which *Divino Afflante Spiritu* has given to biblical studies? The most basic one is, without any doubt, the recognition of the existence of “literary forms” in the sacred texts. The Encyclical, therefore, not only permits, but recommends that the inspired books be approached by the analysis of the literary form involved. Is there history, allegory or poetry in such and such a book? And if so, what is the real content of the message enveloped in the historical account or in the allegorical and poetical treatment of that book? What was the intention of divine author and that of the human instruments?

The analysis of the literary form of a sacred document in no way affects the inspired character of the writing itself. We all know that the Holy Spirit, who is the primary anchor of Holy Scripture, has made use of human instruments according to their nature, and not as mere automatic machines. That nature, however, is not an intellect and will in the abstract, but an intellect and will conditioned by the historical circumstance, by the psychology of the people, by the literary forms in vogue among this particular people at this particular time and place. Apart from truth itself, which is guaranteed by the fact that the sacred books are inspired by God, whatever elements are usually apt to influence any other human author can be assumed to have also influenced the human “author” of the sacred books.<sup>2</sup>

And this consideration is all the more important in the analysis of a book derived from the ancient Orient. What ancient oriental authors intended to signify by their words is not determined only by the laws of grammar and philology, or merely by examining the context. It is absolutely necessary for the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. John E. Huesman, “Rediscovering the Bible,” in Donald J. Wolf and James V. Schall, eds., *Current Trends in Theology* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1965), 63.

interpreter or exegete to go back in spirit to the remote centuries of the East and make proper use of aids offered by history, archaeology, ethnology and other sciences in order to discover what literary forms the writers of that early age intended to use and did in fact employ.<sup>3</sup>

There is yet another consideration which we find recommended by the Encyclical of Pius XII. To express what they had in mind, the ancient peoples of the Orient did not always use the same forms and expressions that we use today. They used those that were current among the peoples of their own time and place. What these were the interpreter cannot determine a priori, but only from the careful study of ancient oriental languages and literatures. At the same time no one who has a correct notion of biblical inspiration will be surprised to find that the sacred writers, like most other ancient writers, employ certain arts of exposition and narrative, certain idioms especially characteristic of the Semitic languages, and certain hyperbolic expressions designed for the sake of emphasis. The sacred books, then, can be assumed to contain any of the forms of expression which were commonly used in human speech by the ancient peoples of the East, so long as they are in no way incompatible with God's sanctity and truth.<sup>4</sup>

All this, as we have pointed out, has now received further clarity and greater strength from the declarations of Vatican II. Here is what *Dei Verbum* says in its chapter 3, which is dedicated to the problem of biblical interpretation:

Those who search out the intention of the sacred writers must, among other things, have regard for the '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.

And further down in the same chapter:

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.<sup>5</sup>

While it can be safely said that *Dei Verbum* in all that regards biblical interpretation, has substantially made its own the teachings of the Encyclical without contributing any new element, it is important to point out one very

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<sup>3</sup> *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, no. 35.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 36.

<sup>5</sup> *Dei Verbum*, no.12.

important recommendation made by *Dei Verbum*. And it is that regarding divine tradition. Since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the intention of its primary author, i.e. of the Holy Spirit, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole Scripture, if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly brought to light. Then the conciliar document declares:

The Living Tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith. It is the task of exegetes to work according to these rules towards a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of sacred Scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgement of the Church may mature.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of this recommendation, as we have remarked, is great, especially when one bears in mind the way in which the relationship between Scripture and Tradition has been treated by the Council. This so-called “two-sources” problem has, of course, not yet been solved by the Council, but the latter has at least declared more emphatically than any other magisterial document that Scripture and Tradition are so closely interrelated, that the one helps for the true understanding of the other. There is a perfect unity, a mutual inherence, between the two. Scripture and Tradition are implied in each other; they flow from the same unique source, namely God, speaking through the prophets and uttering his most perfect Word in and through Christ, and they run towards the same fulfilment, which will be the eschatological flowering of the Gospel, when God will be all in all.<sup>7</sup>

The foregoing will be more readily understood if one also remembers that for Vatican II, tradition does not merely consist in the transmission of truth cast in the form of a series of propositions. It is not even a matter of teaching only, but rather of “teaching, life and worship.”<sup>8</sup> Understood in this dynamic sense, then, Tradition adds to Scripture the of its transmission to and through post-apostolic times, and then so forth from generation to generation to the end of time, always under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who is the author of both Scripture and Tradition.

In the light of the Council’s recommendation referred to above one may perhaps say that Scripture and Tradition are always to be considered as a rule for each other. Tradition is not a fixed rule, as we have seen, but the transmission

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., no.9. Cf. Pierre Grelot, “Tradition as Source and Environment of Scripture,” *Concilium* 10, no. 2 (1966): 5-15.

<sup>8</sup> *Dei Verbum*, no. 8.

of “life.” Now this life, like every other true life, must continually develop. “For there is growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (cf. Lk 2:19,51), etc.”<sup>9</sup> If Tradition, which is the rule of Scripture, develops, then also the understanding and interpretation of Scripture must be expected to develop accordingly. It can thus be said that the new positions officially taken by the Church, mostly through *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and *Dei Verbum*, regarding scriptural interpretation, do not constitute a real change in the traditional approach, but are rather indications of an important development within the same Church Tradition.

Thirty years have passed since *Divino Afflante* has seen the light of day, and throughout these last thirty years this magisterial document has truly been considered as the *magna charta* of biblical scholarship, thanks to which the green light for renewal in the Church has been switched on. We are perhaps yet at the beginning of such a renewal. One may safely hope that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in the light of the teaching contained in this document, the People of God may continue to walk in great strides along the paths of renewal and thus, while understanding more deeply God’s divine plan of salvation, they may also share more fully in the divine life it provides.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., nos. 8-9.