“Dei verbum in Light of the History of Catholic Biblical Interpretation.”

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Abstract: This article offers a narrative of the history of Catholic biblical interpretation leading up to the Second Vatican Council, including the engagement of Catholic scholars with the ongoing developments in critical biblical studies. This history is beneficial in understanding the teaching on the interpretation of Scripture as found in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei verbum, indicating the polyvalent ways biblical interpretation was practiced in the patristic and medieval periods, as well as the challenges that emerging critical scholarship posed to such traditional exegesis. Through this narrative of Catholic interpretation in the centuries and generations leading up to the Council—including that during the era of the modernist controversy—the essay seeks to provide a broader context in which to understand the achievement of Dei verbum.

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei verbum, was among the Council’s most foundational and important documents, synthesizing and advancing magisterial teachings in areas including the nature of Divine Revelation, its source and how this relates to traditional debates on the relation of Scripture and Tradition, the nature of inspiration, the interpretation of Scripture, and the place of Scripture in the life of the Church. On the one hand, there is no question that the council and Dei verbum inspired a great wealth of biblical scholarship by Catholic scholars, who emerged as respected scholars in the academy as peers and collaborators with other Christian and Jewish scholars. On the other hand, recent decades have witnessed ongoing dissatisfaction with aspects of academic biblical scholarship, especially from certain theologians, including Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI.1 Those who wish to understand contemporary discussions of

1. In 2010, for example, Pope Benedict XVI issued his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, Verbum Domini, which was arguably the most significant document pertaining to Scripture to come from the Magisterium since the Second Vatican Council. Pope Benedict’s broader theological work also includes efforts to exemplify and holds such potential and
how one should interpret the Scriptures and how this relates to the doctrinal tradition can gain valuable perspective by considering the broader history of interpretation both before and after the council. In this piece, I first draw upon some of the scholarship on the history of biblical interpretation to outline the first nineteen hundred years of biblical interpretation in the Church. Then I consider more extensively the dawn of the twentieth century leading up to the Second Vatican Council, all of which will help us to understand why biblical scholars have been so determined to safeguard the freedom they had gained to make use of modern methods and why they saw more theological concerns as a threat to their ability to study the text itself.2

Catholic Exegetes within the History of Biblical Interpretation

In the Beginning ....

As with Jewish interpretation, the church fathers evidenced a vast array of exegetical diversity far broader than what has come to be identified with the quadruplex sensus, the fourfold sense.3 The liturgy is where biblical interpretation was


continually born anew and lived. Prayer, and particularly the eucharistic liturgy, was
during the patristic, medieval, and subsequent eras the prime setting for biblical
interpretation among Christians.\(^4\) In the tradition, Scripture has been widely
understood as liturgical, sacramental, and performative; it is intended primarily for liturgy,
where it functions sacramentally and prepares for the sacraments, and then facilita-
tes their efficacious work in our lives, leading to our divinization, or deification.\(^5\)

In contrast to many post-conciliar scholars who had to fight for the right to
use critical methods and were put off by some of the excesses of earlier scholars,
pre-modern Christian exegetes had concern for more than simply the literal sense of

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156. Comparable is Beryl Smalley’s classic work, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle
Ages*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983 [1941]), which sees the waning of the spiritual
sense and the waxing of the literal sense, in the same general time period. More his-
torical precision, at least regarding medieval exegesis, is in Gilbert Dahan, *Lire la Bible
au moyen-âge: Essais d’herméneutique médiévale* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2009); and
Gilbert Dahan, *L’Exégèse chrétienne de la Bible en Occident médiéval: XIIe-XIVe siècles*
(Paris: Cerf, 1999). Alastair Minnis puts it well in his summation, “the methodologies of
medieval exegesis were a lot more flexible and context-specific than has sometimes been
allowed.” His conclusion that de Lubac (over) emphasized spiritual exegesis, whereas
Smalley (over) emphasized the literal sense, is perhaps correct. See Alastair Minnis, *Med-
eval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed.
with a new preface by the author (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,
2010 [1984]), xii.

4. On the liturgical context of Christian biblical interpretation throughout church history
see, e.g., Derek A. Olsen, *Reading Matthew with Monks: Liturgical Interpretation in
Anglo-Saxon England* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 2015); Matthew Levering, *Engag-
ing the Doctrine of Revelation: The Mediation of the Gospel through Church and
Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 59-85; Scott Hahn, *Consuming the
2013), 39-47; Denis Farkasfalvy, O.Cist., *Inspiration and Interpretation: A Theological
Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America
Press, 2010), 63-87; Scott W. Hahn, “Canon, Cult and Covenant: The Promise of Liturgical
Hermeneutics,” in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Scott
Hahn, Robin Parry, Christopher Seitz, and Al Wolters, 207-235 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,
2006); Scott Hahn, *Letter and Spirit: From Written Text to Living Word in the
Liturgy* (New York: Doubleday, 2005); Scott W. Hahn, “Worship in the Word: Toward a
Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 2003), xvi-xviii and 25-79.

5. Scott Hahn, whose major scholarly work (*Kinship By Covenant*) was published by Yale
University Press (2009) with a foreword by David Noel Freedman, puts it well when he
writes, “Having formed this understanding—with respect to the ecclesial setting, the
patristic traditions, and the privileged liturgical setting for the Word—we begin to discover
the sacramentalty of Scripture and experience its performative power precisely as it is
proclaimed in the liturgy and then fulfilled in the celebration of the Eucharist. Christ
himself is present when God’s life-giving word is proclaimed at the Eucharistic celebra-
tion. He who is the Way and the Truth and the Life speaks life to us, and, when we listen,
we are transformed and renewed by that life-giving Word so that we can walk in His Way
and live the Truth... as the Word is proclaimed and expounded in the Liturgical assem-
bly of the Church, it has performative power—it functions sacramentally in renewing

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