

Appendix VII - Scripture is Without Error

At Vatican II, in its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum* in Latin, the Catholic Church reiterated its ancient conviction that Scripture, as God's written word, could not be at odds with reality, could not deceive:

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Sacred Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures. Thus, "all Scripture is inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim.3:16)" (DV,11).³¹⁶

Although not employed by *Dei Verbum*, the term "inerrancy" came into vogue in the nineteenth century to denote Scripture's freedom from error.

In discussions of *Dei Verbum*'s teaching on inerrancy, the portion I have italicized is the common citation. As we can see though, this omits the first clause of a very dense, complex sentence, "Since, *therefore, all* that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm *should be affirmed by the Holy Spirit*, we must acknowledge..." The same thought is continued by *2 Timothy 3:16*, "*all Scripture* is inspired by God." Because all of Scripture was produced under the action of the Holy Spirit, for the sake of our salvation, it must be acknowledged as teaching the truth "firmly, faithfully and without error." The Church is not subscribing to fundamentalism, taking every word at face-value; but it is saying that once we take account of literary genres and figurative language, whatever Scripture does in fact affirm is without error.

Admittedly, there are many gifted Catholic scripture scholars and churchmen who do not present *Dei Verbum* in the manner I have. Rather than a reaffirmation of the Church's historic faith in the inerrancy of Scripture, they see it positing a limitation. As Fr. George Montague, a dynamic priest and past president of the Catholic Biblical Association of America, has written that Scripture's inspiration extends to historical material but

³¹⁶Flannery, Austin, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1992), p.757. Italics added

“only to the degree that it contributes to our salvation.”³¹⁷ “Historical errors,” could be admitted in matters not directly bearing upon the message of salvation.³¹⁸ The widely used *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, in its article “Church Pronouncements,” says:

On inerrancy Vatican II made an important qualification as our italics indicate: “The Books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error *that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation*” (3:11)... Thus, it is proper to take the clause as specifying: Scriptural teaching is truth without error to the extent that it conforms to the salvific purpose of God. Decisions about that purpose involves an a posteriori approach in the church, paying attention to literary forms and historical conditions.”³¹⁹

Robert Gnuse, associate professor of Old Testament at Loyola University in New Orleans, in his work *The Authority of the Bible*, devoted less than half a page to the issue, concluding that the Church has clearly rejected a position of “total inerrancy”:

Several revisions during the Second Vatican Council between 1962 and 1964 transformed [*Dei Verbum*] from a narrow statement to a more open definition, which could admit the truth of salvation was without error while the written words need not be... The final statement read, “...we must profess of the books of Scripture that they teach with certainty, with fidelity and without error the truth which God wanted recorded in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.”

Thus, the Roman Catholic Church has rejected several views in the last two centuries: subsequent approval by the Church or the Spirit, negative assistance by the Spirit, verbal dictation, inspiration of ideas, inspiration of faith and morals, *and total inerrancy*.³²⁰

³¹⁷Montague, George T. *Understanding the Bible: A Basic Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Paulist, 1997) p.195.

³¹⁸ Ibid, p.195-196.

³¹⁹ Brown, Raymond E. and Collins, Thomas Aquinas, “Church Pronouncements” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Ed. R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmeyer, and R. E. Murphy, p.1169 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990).

³²⁰ Gnuse, Robert. *The Authority of the Bible: Theories of Inspiration, Revelation and the Canon of Scripture*. (New York: Paulist, 1985), p.12.