

An Examination of
Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (DEI VERBUM=DV)
As an Authoritative Description of the Authority of Scripture

Dr. Harry McSorley
Consultant to
The Canadian A/RC Dialogue

The Authority of Scripture According to DV

Despite all the justified attention given by commentators to the relatively new formulations found in DV chapter II concerning the close relationship that exists between Scripture, Tradition and the teaching office of the Church, it is well to remember with the late Karl Barth that, as against one chapter on tradition--actually, the transmission of revelation--there are four chapters concerned more or less exclusively with Scripture, the other, chapter I, being a statement on revelation itself.¹

1. DV does not use the term "authority" in speaking of the importance of Scripture. In DV "authority" is used only in connection with the derived authority of the living teaching office (magisterium) whose exclusive task it is authentically to interpret the Word of God and "whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ." (art. 10)
2. Implicit in DV is the view that to God and to his revealing Word alone belongs absolute, underived authority, for "the obedience of faith . . . must be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man entrusts his whole self freely to God . . ." (a.5). Such faith is clearly due to God alone and to his Christ "in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion" (a.7).
3. While the Holy Spirit has been promised to the church as its guide unto the truth, it is Sacred Scripture alone which is believed to have been written "under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit" and, as such, it has "God as its author and has been handed down as such to the church herself." (a.11). Not of Tradition or the magisterium, but only of Scripture, is it said, consequently, that "inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and apostles." (a.21)
4. "The teaching office (magisterium) is not above the Word of God, but serves it . . ." (a.10). "These words are inserted so that the separated brethren may immediately see that the magisterium in the Catholic Church is in no way considered as the lord of the Word of God, but as its servant, whose task it is to interpret it, adding or subtracting nothing."²
5. a. Sacred Scripture and Tradition together are "the supreme rule of faith." (a. 21). For, "it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws its certainty about everything that has been revealed." (a. 9). "The sense of the

[latter] affirmation is to be discerned and understood from the tenor of the document. From this it is clear: Tradition is not to be presented as if it were a quantitative supplement to Sacred Scripture; nor is SS to be presented as a complete codification of revelation."³

b. "Like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and ruled by Sacred Scripture." (a. 21). This is the closest DV gets to asserting the critical function of SS over against what might be inauthentic "traditions".⁴

II

Dei Verbum as an Authoritative Description of the Authority of Scripture

1. As is well know, Vatican II made no new dogmatic definitions of faith.⁵
2. Yet it is clear that several affirmations have been made (such as points 2, 3, 4 and 5/b above) which are common to the traditional faith of both Roman Catholic and most other Christian churches.
3. DV's teaching on the relation between SS, Tradition and Magisterium, while not a new definition of faith, is nevertheless "the doctrine of the supreme teaching ministry of the Church". As such "ought to be received and embraced by each and every Christian believer according to the mind of the Council itself... following the norms of theological interpretation."⁶ Thus, while a Roman Catholic reads this document with full openness to the truth that may be found in the document, there is room for dissent for well-founded reasons, and much more room for a loyal critique of the document.⁷ Moreover, Roman Catholic theologians are free to hold certain valuable insights advocated at the council which were neither adopted nor repudiated by the council. One thinks, for example, in connection with DV, of Cardinal Konig's much more nuanced statement of the inerrancy of SS, of Cardinal Meyer's insistence on SS as a critique of Tradition, and of the partially abandoned -- but not rejected -- formulation: "All Christian preaching, and the Christian religion itself, must always regard Scripture as the norm and authority by which they are ruled and judged."⁸
4. The authority of the Vatican II teaching in relation to "universal" or "local" councils before and after the schism between East and West and the 16th century breach between the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches.⁹

A. "Local" and "provincial" councils or synods were held in the Eastern and Western church prior to and since Nicaea. As such, their doctrinal teaching or disciplinary decrees were regarded as normative for the church or churches involved. The decisions of such synods were at times received approvingly in whole or in part by other churches. For example, The Second Synod of Orange (529) against Semipelagianism, was received by the Roman bishop and then afterwards by virtually all Western churches so that this teaching became a part of the faith of virtually the entire Western church. In other cases the decisions of local or provincial synods were rejected in whole or in part as false, misleading or heretical.

B. "Universal" or "Ecumenical" councils: New research into the ecumenical councils and their authority has rendered untenable many of the treatments of them that can be found in Roman Catholic text books from the Counter-Reformation to the present. To attempt the new synthetic statement of such councils that is required is out of the question in a position paper such as this. I shall therefore simply list some of the problems that must be considered in any future statement concerning the nature, number and authority of ecumenical councils.

a. The tension between material and formal authority. The first seven councils generally regarded as ecumenical by the Eastern churches and the Roman Catholic Church were far from ecumenical in their composition. They were overwhelmingly Eastern in their representation, although, with the exception of Constantinople I and II, there was Western representation at all of them, sometimes, but not always, with the legates of the Roman bishop presiding. Recent scholarship tells us that the authority of Nicaea was at first a material authority, i.e. the creed of Nicaea was accepted at first because it was true, because it was in conformity with Sacred Scripture, which was the formal authority par excellence. As this creed gained acceptance, i.e., as it was gradually received by the various Churches, it began to assume the character of a formal authority or standard as well. Orthodoxy was henceforth not just a matter of conformity to SS, but to the faith of Nicaea, and then of Chalcedon.¹⁰ Gregory the Great's remark is a classical indication of the formal authority enjoyed by the ecumenical councils at the beginning of the seventh century: "I confess that I receive and revere as the four books of the Gospel so also the four Councils . . ." ¹¹

b. The uncertain number of Ecumenical Councils. The fact that Gregory wrote this about 50 years after the "5th Ecumenical Council" (Constantinople II, 553) raises one of the several important problems concerning ecumenical councils: Which are ecumenical, and how many were there? Standard Roman Catholic treatises on the subject quickly volunteer the information that there were 21, the last

being Vatican II. Recent research, however, has enlightened us to the fact that virtually all these contemporary listings are traceable to St. Robert Bellarmine's list of 19. Prior to him -- and well into the sixteenth century -- there was a very wide range of opinions in the West about the number of ecumenical councils.¹² For example, Constantinople IV (870), not recognized by the East, but regarded as the 8th ecumenical council by most Roman Catholic theologians, was first listed among the ecumenical councils only in the 11th century, and then only sporadically.¹³

c. The importance of "reception." A more serious problem emerges when one looks at the so-called ecumenical councils of the medieval Western church. In contrast to the first seven councils, in which decisions reached in the East were confirmed wholly or partially in the West by the Roman bishop and his colleague bishops, we now have a situation in which the Western church -- after the schism -- makes conciliar decisions not only without Eastern representation or confirmation, but more often than not, even without Eastern awareness that a council was being held or was held.¹⁴

In short, while the ecumenical councils of the first millenium were initiated in the East and received by the Roman Church and then by the West, the Western medieval councils commonly listed as ecumenical by post-Reformation Roman Catholic theologians were, by and large, simply not received as ecumenical by the East. That Trent and Vatican I have not been received as ecumenical councils outside the Roman Catholic Church is an understatement.¹⁵

Roman Catholic apologists have, of course, dealt with the aforementioned difficulty in a quite simple manner: by assuming that the Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant Christians are "extra ecclesiam", since they are either schismatics or heretics. They therefore do not belong to the oikumene which is either to be represented at or to receive the decrees of councils which would be ecumenical. The other side of this coin is the assumption that the Roman Catholic Church is, without qualification, the one, true, Church of Christ. Vatican II, of course, has shattered the basic assumptions of this apologetic, not only by its refusal to make the Church of Christ coterminous with the Roman Catholic Church, but also by its explicit affirmation that all those who believe in Christ and are baptized are "incorporated into Christ" and "are brought into a certain, though imperfect communion with the Catholic Church."¹⁶

No more than with the question of the role of Scripture as a critic of Tradition, however, did Vatican II develop all the implications of its new awareness of the

churchly status of other Christian bodies for traditional Roman Catholic assumptions about such things as ecumenical councils.

d. The interpretation of conciliar teaching. Recent research has invalidated widespread, but dangerously misleading assumptions about the way in which the decrees of such councils as Vienne, Constance, and Trent are to be interpreted. At least from the 14th to the 16th centuries it is clear that the formula, "Si quis dixerit . . . anathema sit", does not necessarily mean an "irreformable" definition of divinely revealed faith is being enacted. The formula was just as often used for the defense of changeable disciplinary norms as it was for what a later century would call "dogmatic definitions of faith."¹⁷ Concerning the ancient councils at which the faith of the church concerning the identity of its Saviour was indeed at stake, it is one of the joys of the ecumenical movement to note how overwhelming a portion of the Christian household is able to profess the faith of the Apostles Creed and that of Nicaea-Constantinople. If there are, however, no genuine Arians in circulation today, there are still many Monophysite Christians in the East who are able even now to accept the intention behind Chalcedon or who are ready for an ecumenical restatement of the Chalcedonian faith that would bring them again into full communion with their separated brethren. In the Roman Catholic Church today, as evidenced by both the Second Vatican Council and the 1973 document of the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, there is an increasing awareness of the distinction that must be made between the essence of a teaching and the way in which it is expressed.¹⁸ This new awareness would seem to bring with it all kinds of possibilities for rapprochement by means of ecumenical interpretation of those past formulations that have separated not only Monophysites from Chalcedonians, but Christians of many different churches from one another.

e. The "infallibility" of ecumenical councils. In more than one recent discussion of infallibility, papal or otherwise, one finds it said that popes, councils, and indeed, the whole church have manifestly erred; therefore they cannot be infallible. In contrast, medieval theologians and the Reformers as well, who were equally aware of errors by and in the church, could nonetheless conclude that "the church does not or cannot err". Their assertion of two apparently contradictory ideas points to a manner of speaking foreign to our age. In this case and several others (e.g. "the first See is judged by no one," and "outside the church no salvation") these theologians would speak quite generally, without expressing the qualifications they implicitly presupposed.

These same theologians could speak so readily about the errors of general councils that one might conclude they in no way attributed infallibility to any conciliar teachings. Contemporary research has shown that many late medieval theologians -- conciliarists and papalists alike -- held to the fallibility of general councils, not in everything they did, to be sure, but at least to an extent that renders quite unrevolutionary Luther's teaching, echoed in articles 19 and 21 of The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, that councils can and have erred.¹⁹ Luther said the same thing about popes. But so did such proponents of papal infallibility as Cardinal Cajetan and Bellarmine! The latter, pro-papal infallibilist says he knows of only one theologian, Albert Pighius, who teaches that popes cannot publicly teach error.²⁰

This is not the place to enter into a systematic discussion of the qualifications and conditions that medieval and modern theologians have attached to their theses concerning ecclesial, conciliar and/or papal infallibility. I simply draw attention to some of the paradoxical language used by these theologians in order to prevent misunderstandings of what has historically been understood by the terms "ecclesia non errat" and "infallibilitas", and perhaps to introduce another aspect of the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue on Authority and the Church.

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NOTES

1. Cited by J. Ratzinger in his part of the commentary on DV in: H. Vorgrimler, ed. Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II, vol. III (New York: Herder and Herder-London: Burns and Oates, 1969), p. 192.
2. Schema Constitutionis de Divina Revelationis (Vatican, 1964), (Form D of Grillmeier's code listed in Ratzinger, p. 165), Relatio F to n.10, p. 24. The "word of God" referred to here is to be understood in terms of the first sentence of a. 10: "Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition from one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the Church"
3. Schema Constitutionis Dogmaticae de Divina Revelatione Modi a Patribus Conciliaribus Propositi a Commissione Doctrinali Examinati (Vatican, 1965), (Form G), Relatio of Abp. E. Florit to chapter II, p. 73: "Sensus huiusmodi affirmationis ulterius diiudicandus est atque circumscribendus ex Schmatis tenore. Ex quo quidem patet: nec Traditionem praesentari veluti quantitativum S. Scripturae supplementum; nec S. Scripturam praesentari veluti integrae revelationis codificationem."
4. As Ratzinger, pp. 192-193 rightly points out: "...we shall have to acknowledge the truth of the criticism that there is, in fact, no explicit mention of the possibility of a distorting tradition and of the place of Scripture as an element within the Church that is also critical of tradition, which means that a most important side of the problem of tradition, as shown by the history of the Church....has been overlooked.... That this opportunity has been missed can only be regarded as an unfortunate omission."
5. See the formal Notificatio made by Abp. P. Felici in his capacity as Secretary General of the Council on November 15, 1965, recalling the Declaratio of the Doctrinal Commission of March 6, 1964: "Ratione habita moris conciliaris ac praesentis Concilii finis pastoralis, haec S. Synoda ea tantum de rebus fidei vel morum ab Ecclesia tenenda definit, quae ut talia aperte ipsa declaraverit.
Cetera autem, quae S. Synodus proponit, utpote Supremi Ecclesiae Magisterii doctrinam, omnes ac singuli christifideles excipere et amplecti debent iuxta ipsius S. Synodi mentem, quae sive ex subiecto materia sive ex dicendi ratione innotescit, secundum normas theologicae interpretationis."
6. Ibid.
7. For the first possibility, see my "The Right of Catholics to Dissent from Humanae Vitae", The Ecumenist (November-December, 1969), pp. 5-9. For the second, see, for example, Ratzinger's critique mentioned in note 4 above.
8. On the last point see Schema Constitutionis de Divina Revelatione (1964), Textus Emendatus, (Form E), p. 43: "Omnis ergo praedicatio ecclesiastica atque ipsa religio christiana ad Scripturam semper respicere debent tamquam ad normam et auctoritatem, quibus reguntur et iudicantur." When this formulation was changed to the much weaker "...S. Scriptura nutriatur oportet" in Form E (Cf. Ratzinger, p. 264), seven bishops urged that the text of Form E or something similar be restored. The Doctrinal Commission replied: "Quae addi proponuntur iam alibi dicta sunt. Scribatur autem: "nutriatur et regatur oportet"Modi....Propositi....Examinati (Form G,) modus 5 to no. 21 and response, p. 61.

9. Here I am taking up Colin Davey's suggestion in his letter to Sister Diane Willey of February 15, 1974.
10. Cf. A. Grillmeier, "Konzil und Rezeption", Theologie und Philosophie 45 (1970), pp. 321-352.
11. Letter to John Bishop of Constantinople, and the Other Patriarchs, Lib. I, n. 25, ML: 77, 478.
12. Cf. R. Baumer, "Die Zahl der allgemeinen Konzilien in der Sicht der Theologen des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts," Annuario Historiae Conciliorum, 1 (1969) pp. 288-313.
13. Cf. K. Baus, "Konzil", in: LThK 6, 496f. H. Luis, "Konzilien", in: LThK 6, 531. underscores both the difficulty of determining which are the truly ecumenical councils and the fact that "there is no clearly binding doctrine on this question".
14. Cf. the dialogue between Anselm of Havelberg and Nicetas of Nicomedia that took place at Constantinople in 1136; transl. in F. Dvornik, Byzantium and the Roman Primacy (New York: Fordham, 1964), pp. 144-147.
15. On the indispensibility of the category and the reality of "reception", long-neglected by Roman Catholic theology in over-reaction to Gallicanism, see Y. Congar, "Reception as an Ecclesiological Reality", Concilium, 77 (1972), pp. 43-69, an abridged and not always accurate translation of his original essay in Revue des sciences philosophiques et theologiques (1972).
16. Cf. Constitution on the Church, a.8 and Decree on Ecumenism, a.3
17. P. Fransen, "The Authority of Councils", in: J. Todd, ed., Problems of Authority (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1962), pp. 43-78.
18. Cf. Decree on Ecumenism, a.6 and Mysterium Ecclesiae, a.5.
19. R. Baumer, "Luthers Ansichten über der Irrtumsfähigkeit des Konzils", in: Wahrheit und Verkündigung: Festschrift für M. Schmaus zum 70. Geburtstag, eds. L. Scheffczyk, W. Dettloff, R. Heinzmann (Paderborn, 1967), pp. 987-1003.
20. De Romano Pontifice, IV, 2 and R. Baumer, "Das Kirchenverständnis Albert Pighes", in: Volk Gottes: Festgabe für J. Hofer (Freiburg, 1967), p. 315 Pighius' view was explicitly rejected as extreme at the First Vatican Council. Cf. Gasser's Expositio in Mansi, Collectio Conciliorum, vol. 52, col. 1218.