

Scripture and Contemporary Catholic Theology: Surveying the field

In *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* (1994), Pope John Paul asked the Church, in paragraph 36, to examine its conscience. He asks Catholics to examine how they have reacted to different aspects of religious indifference, how they have been complicit in regimes that have not respected human rights, how they have sought to react to many of the challenges that the 20th century had placed before them. One of the means he suggests of making this examination of conscience is to look at the reception given to the Second Vatican Council. Here he asks:

An examination of conscience must also consider the *reception given to the Council*, this great gift of the Spirit to the Church at the end of the second millennium. To what extent has the word of God become more fully the soul of theology and the inspiration of the whole of Christian living, as *Dei Verbum* sought? (TMA, # 36)

This examination of conscience might be a good place to start our survey of the field of Catholic biblical studies today. The field has dramatically changed over the past one hundred years. Where do Catholic Biblical studies lie? Have we received that call to make the Word of God the soul of theology and the inspiration of the whole of Christian living?

As we give a cursory glance at the field of Catholic biblical studies, different aspects of the contemporary situation become apparent. Catholic faculties of theology have a good range of biblical courses. Catholic names (e.g. Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy) are among the finest Biblical scholars of recent times. Catholics hold academic positions of note even outside of Catholic faculties. They are present in the major academic organizations for Scripture study. They sit at table with their colleagues of the Jewish or Reformation traditions as equals. It would appear that Catholic Scripture studies have never been more “catholic” (in the sense of universal).

There are many positives to this. Much has been done in scholarship to allow Catholicism to “catch up.” However, our examination of conscience pushes us to look deeper into our soul than the apparent. We have adopted methods and tools that are necessary and useful. How have we used them? Have we been successful in placing Scripture where the Council asked us to place it?

In respect of this situation, I would like to base this presentation around three questions:

- **How did this situation come about, as historically Catholicism was more credited with being of a “sacramental” disposition and left the Scriptural Tradition to the Reformers?**
- **Does this mean that there is no longer any essentially *Catholic* approach to Scripture?**
- **How might Scripture become again the primary and the core element in theological speculation as Catholicism faces an enormous challenge to bring its theology to face some of the major and vexing questions of our time?**

How did this situation come about?

The Scriptures have always been, along with Tradition, the primary source of transmitting Divine Revelation from one generation to the next. One of the primary aspects of a Catholic attitude to Scripture lies in this relationship between Scripture and Tradition. It is worth exploring this relationship for a few minutes.

The model I present to you is loosely based around the model of a contemporary Catholic scholar, Sandra Schneiders¹. She speaks mainly of the New Testament but I adapt her thought to explain this in terms of the entire corpus of Scripture.

God reveals himself to humanity in history and in historical realities. This is true for the Jewish people who were the first recipients of this Revelation of God and who have preserved it in their writings and in their traditions. For Christians, the fulness of this Revelation of God is in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. God has revealed himself to humanity. Yet these events happened a long time ago. Are we simply preserving the memory of an historical event, such as the death of Caesar on the Ides of March? No, the God who has revealed himself seeks to enter into relationship with us. Revelation is not simply an historical fact, but a living reality—transmitted to us through Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Tradition has as its foundation the gift of the Spirit to the Church, which guides our appreciation and allows us, down the centuries, to use our intelligence and our imagination to grasp this reality in new and fresh ways that are adapted to our own time and our own culture. This is to be seen in our liturgy and preaching, our prayer, our spirituality and in the teaching office of the Church.

Examples might help to clarify this. The Fathers offered reflections on Scripture as openings to a dialogue with Greek philosophy to credit Christianity as a credible and intelligent form of world outlook. The Medieval artists were inspired by the great biblical imagery to create much of the artwork that still inspires and enlivens us today. Much of our literature in the West is incomprehensible without Scripture as a basic term of reference. Scripture has been and continues to be one of the mainstays not only of faith but also of civilization for the Western World.

Yet this situation is not without its difficulties. The relationship of Church to Scripture has often turned from the ideal of the “drawing of water” from the well of the Scriptures to sustain and nurture growth and freshness among the People of God, to sometimes niggardly and petty arguments. One of my best lecturers often remarked that every great heresy begins with a preposition. Scripture is a means of God’s self communication to us in human terms, but as human terms always are open to corruption and misuse, so we have often misused Scripture.

This has been the backdrop to a subtle but dangerous attitude, which grew up among Catholics. Theology for too long had to deal with defending the position taken rather than with a real engagement with the power of God’s Word, constantly being made incarnate in Tradition. Unfortunately, Scripture has often been manipulated in every tradition as a means of proof-texting already firmly adopted positions.

¹ Schneiders, S. *The Revelatory Text*, Chapter 3.

This polemical context had a very strong effect on the study of Scripture in Catholic circles. While the very common image of a Catholicism which left the Council of Trent with a stronger sense of itself as a sacramental reality and left Scripture to the Protestants is a gross simplification, it is one which has hued the picture of a Catholic attitude toward Scripture. Too long in theological tradition and in devotional praxis, there was a certain mistrust and a lack of confidence with reference to Scripture. People were sure of the answers they needed to give and Scripture would sometimes need to be gently manipulated to offer a firm background to those certain answers.

The biggest trouble with this is, of course, that once we are sure of the answers, we often forget that they may no longer be the answers to the questions being posed. This is precisely what happened in the nineteenth century. The questions began to change from polemic assertions to an appreciation of the historic milieu from which the Scriptures came. New scientific methods of scrutinizing the text of Scripture were matched by a new interest in the manuscripts and witnesses to that text. History as a discipline became more scientific and critical and there arose a parallel need to critically examine the historiography of the biblical world in the light of what was being discovered in archaeology and in manuscripts about the entire region of the ANE. A new appreciation of literary genres and of redactional arrangements and “layers” within texts offered new possibilities of theorizing when and where some of these texts had their origin and why they were deemed worthy of preservation by the communities in which they had a role and an importance. These approaches of criticism and forensic examination of the text, literary genre, historiography and life setting of the Scriptures make up part of what is called generically “the historical-critical method”. In essence, this method answered what exegesis should always seek to answer in every historical context: how to critique Scripture to make it credible in the light of the dominant philosophical and cultural trends of the time. Exegesis became more historically critical at the same time as people started to ask if Homer really wrote the entire *Iliad* or if these fossils of ancient species bore any relation to modern living species.

On the whole, Catholicism and Catholic faculties of theology did not embrace this new élan of study but stayed with a view of Scripture that was needed to bolster apologetics.

On an official level, this position was somewhat endorsed, if not adopted, by the decree of the First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius* (April 24, 1870). This document reflects the concern of the time to see how to balance the traditional and sacred views of the divine authorship and inerrancy of Sacred Scripture with these new methods of research, which seemed to challenge, or even undermine, these sacred principles. In an atmosphere of distrust of these new methods, there is a reinforcement of these sacred principles of inerrancy, inspiration and divine authorship.

At the end of the nineteenth century, this is precisely the quandary of a Catholic approach to Scripture: can Catholic scholars use these new methods in good conscience or would their so doing be an implicit, or even an explicit, denial of central Catholic teachings around Scripture?

This is the backdrop to a new movement within academic circles in the Catholic Church, the Biblical Movement, which, in tandem with the Liturgical movement, and the great catch-call of *Nouvelle Théologie* for a “*retour aux sources*”, became one of the elements

that formed the background to Vatican II. Without outlining an entire history of this movement, two figures are of utmost importance. Père Marie-Joseph Lagrange (1855-1938) was a French Dominican who was the founder of the *Ecole Biblique* in Jerusalem. Cardinal Augustine Bea was at one stage lecturer in the Biblicum and chosen by John XXIII, at already 77 years of age, to head the newly founded Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in 1959, one of the collaborators behind the drafting of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), which was to open the door wider to Catholic involvement in scientific methods of research into Scripture and one of the principal movers behind *Dei Verbum*. The importance of the Biblical Movement and the integrity of its principal characters in promoting scientific research while remaining loyal to the essential principles of Catholic teaching (to the point whereby now Lagrange is considered for beatification) is beyond measure. As the Church rolls towards Vatican II and its four major constitutions, Catholic exegetes are demonstrating that scientific methods of research into the Scriptures can be reconciled with Catholic Tradition and teaching.

On an official level, this takes wings also. In *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), Pope Leo XIII seeks “to impart to Scripture study a direction suitable to the needs of the present day.”² In 1943, as we mentioned already with Bea as one of the collaborators, Pius XII promulgated *Divino Afflante Spiritu* which acknowledged the benefits of the years of Biblical study and the fruits of using historical methods. The highpoint of recognition for Biblical studies comes with the Constitution *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II.

The drafting of *Dei Verbum* and the intrigues surrounding it would make Dan Brown blush...! These include the dramatic intervention of an elderly and venerable bishop, Msgr. Lienart of Lille, who took the microphone from Cardinal Ottaviani and rather dramatically announced his disapproval of the text of the curial schema, the subsequent debates between two camps, often epitomized by the key figures of each, Ottaviani and Bea, the ultimate rejection of the initial schema, the *coup de grace* that was the intervention of John XXIII, the redrafting of a text which was to be a very fine document that held together a sense of faithfulness to the essentially Catholic of how Revelation is transmitted through Tradition and Sacred Scripture and simultaneously balanced the need for an openness to new methods and approaches to Biblical studies.

Ronald Witherup, in his book on *Dei Verbum* in the series “Rediscovering Vatican II” has a pithy summary of how *Dei Verbum* manages to retain essential Catholic principles about Revelation and how Revelation is transmitted (in continuity with Trent and Vatican I) but still manages to incorporate openness to novelty. He lists twenty-one major emphases of the Constitution, some in continuity and some quite novel. I cannot discuss all these here, but I would like to mention some of them³:

- While the Constitution expresses itself in a way that is consistent with the standard doctrine on Revelation, there is a novelty in the expression of this. DV uses a more personalist view of Revelation. Revelation is not simply a “depositing” of ideas and concepts, but rather the act of a self-giving Trinitarian God who seeks to enter into relationship with humanity. God invites people into a relationship: humanity can choose to accept.

² Bechard 38, *PD* 2

³ Witherup 44-54

- There is a more dynamic view of Revelation. Christ is the fulness of Revelation but the Church on her pilgrim path needs to grow in understanding of this Revelation until, ultimately, “the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her” (DV 8). This is important. Tradition is a living reality that develops and grows. While the Truth of who God is does not change, our perception and appreciation of it does!
- The role of the Church as the authoritative teaching authority in the process of Revelation. The Magisterium, the teaching office of the Pope and Bishops in continuity with the Apostles and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, guarantees the authenticity of the truth that it proclaims. At the same time there is the emphasis that the Magisterium serves the truth and is not master over it (DV 10).
- The Constitution reasserts the doctrine of inspiration, that God is the author of the Sacred Scriptures and that the human authors are under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. DV 12 is a firm recognition that “God speaks through humans in human fashion”. This is followed by a call to the interpreter to investigate what meaning the biblical writers really intended. This is the clarion call to Catholic exegetes to use the methods and the approaches open to them to seek out the meaning of the Scriptures. Throughout the Constitution, without its being made explicit, the assumption is present that the tools of exegesis available should be used to offer a sound interpretation of Scripture to the People of God.

The promulgation of *Dei Verbum* on 18 November 1965 was a definitive moment in defining Catholic biblical studies and a Catholic understanding of the role and the place of the Scriptures in the life of the Church. Its implementation over the last almost fifty years has been an exciting time. The generation of courageous pioneers of the Biblical movement was succeeded by a generation of scholars who adopted the scientific approach to the interpretation of Scripture (e.g. Brown, Fitzmyer, Roland Murphy) and whose work encouraged a renewal of theology and spirituality in the Church (which may be seen in elements of a recommitment to Social Justice, enormous growth in the theological formation of lay people and new impetus in ecumenism). That generation has now passed and a newer generation of Catholic scholars inherits their mantle, but there is a new challenge and a new question...

Is there a distinctly Catholic approach to the Interpretation of Scripture?

So far, we have spoken about the people and events that allowed Catholic biblical studies to “come to the table” of biblical scholarship and to sit as peers with their Reformer and Jewish confreres. As we have noted, this has been of invaluable service in renewal and revitalization of many different aspects of the life of the Church. Without wishing to make *Dei Verbum* sound like a perfect document (which it is not), its impact over the past almost fifty years has changed things, mostly for the better. That generation of scholars who first took up the mantle of the Biblical movement has left us with a rich legacy of scholarship. Catholic scholars will use methods and approaches to Scripture studies but will always have recourse to the essential tool

that is the historical critical method. Have we arrived at a perfect situation? If not, what is/are the challenge(s) now?

We have not arrived at the perfect situation and we do have challenges, too many to discuss in this short time. However, there are three challenges (or, more optimistically, opportunities) upon which we might reflect. These three challenges I have drawn from a famous lecture in 1988 by the then Cardinal Ratzinger, from the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and from a reading of *Dei Verbum*.

- There is the rising challenge, already known in Protestant circles, of **fundamentalism**.
- There is the challenge inherent in *DV* 5, which is often ignored, of how “**faith**” as a response to God’s Revelation can be accommodated with the rigours of scientific research and become part of the Tradition.
- There is the challenge of continuing to integrate the study of Scripture into the life and into the mission of the Church.

There are many more challenges facing the Catholic Scripture scholar but these three are emblematic of the difficulties that face us at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Fundamentalism

The problem of Fundamentalism is more widespread and more pernicious than one might imagine. It is not reserved to dramatic acts (e.g. Cromwell’s soldiers at Drogheda and Wexford being told they were soldiers of Gideon). It is, unfortunately, often more subtle and more pernicious. It can permeate preaching, piety and even some forms of teaching. At the heart of it is a lack of necessary formation and a lack of due diligence in reading biblical texts, matched with a bland certainty of the correctness of one’s presuppositions and one’s stance towards reality. It is more widespread than one thinks! Elements of it are equally present in the bland homily, or the justification of liturgical or devotional preference “because it is what the Good Book says”, or the upstart student who turns an essay on a Scriptural theme into a diatribe. These are not abstract and imaginary hypotheses but real examples of fundamentalism that I have seen!

One of the clearest and most direct responses to this comes in the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission from 1993 *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. This document is pivotal in furthering and developing the implementation of *DV*. The one approach that it condemns is the fundamentalist approach, which it describes as “*a naively literalist interpretation, one, that is to say, which excludes every effort at understanding the Bible that takes account of its historical origins and development.*”⁴

In respect to our question of whether there is a specifically Catholic approach to Scripture Studies, we begin with a negative. A fundamentalist attitude towards Scripture is definitely **not** Catholic. Catholicism, and particularly the Catholic sense of Tradition, asks us to use our intelligence and our faculties to delve deeper than the immediate and to discover the richness of the Scriptures.

⁴ IBC I F, Bechard 273.

Faith

DV 5 offers a reflection on what might be the human reaction to the Revelation of God. It is the “obedience of faith”, quoted directly from Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Faith (pistis) in Pauline terms is an offering of one’s loyalty to a cause, in the same way as one might offer one’s loyalty to the Emperor or to one’s king. Faith is not a passive attitude but a dynamic reality, one that develops and matures, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This passage, short and succinct, offers one essential element of a Catholic attitude towards Scripture and towards exegesis. Our reading of Scripture is not simply a personal and individual action but rather it is an entry into the Tradition of the Church, the community that keeps this Word alive. Our reading of Scripture has to be scientific and researched but has to remember always that this is an essential part of the Tradition that traces itself back to Apostles, that has been enriched by the imagination and intelligence of great figures and that is constantly actualized in the life of believers.

This is not something that has been taken for granted. This is a very challenging reality. Cardinal de Lubac notes that it is an interesting move that the Constitution speaks of a *personal faith as a response rather than of a submission to authority*. We do not read Scripture as a rulebook of an organization to which we belong but as an act of coming to understand and to know. Lubac defines it as both “don et assentiment”⁵ (gift and assent).

In that light, it is good to define one essential element that may help to constitute a specifically Catholic attitude to Scripture studies: the obedience of faith. This is not a call to pietistic or devotional attitude to Scripture, but rather a call to recognise the nature of the text in the Tradition to which it belongs. True appreciation of the text in a Catholic context recognizes and includes a firm historical-critical examination of the text but also recognizes the reality that these writings have enlivened and continue to enliven, have nurtured and continue to nurture, have guided and continue to guide---and that is what we call Tradition!

The Challenge to integrate Scripture into the life and Mission of the Church

Here I would like to make reference to two concepts from the 1993 document from the PBC. In that document, two practices are promoted and encouraged. One is the very ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*, defined as a reading of a passage of Scripture, “received as the Word of God and leading, at the prompting of the Spirit, to meditation, prayer and contemplation”.⁶ *Lectio Divina* is not simply another devotion but rather an exercise of breathing the life into the Church on an individual and communal level. The reception of a piece of Scripture as the Word of God and leading to prayer is essential for the Life of the Church.

Actualization is a parallel and related term. Coming from the French, where *actuel* means “present” or “current”. Actualization is recognition of the fact that the Scriptures are more than a collection of historical documents but God’s Word that is addressed to the Church in our own time and place. In Tradition, the message of the Bible comes to be applied to contemporary circumstances and in contemporary language. It begins with a

⁵ De Lubac, 121.

⁶ Bechard, 309.

correct interpretation of the text and then it continues in the stream of living Tradition. This is described as a necessary task, “that of bringing the message of the Bible to the ears and the hearts of the people of our time.”⁷

These two concepts carry the interpretation of the Bible beyond any academic or scholastic usage but into the heart of Christian living. Our liturgy and prayer take their language dominantly from the Bible, our social justice work and our missionary activities are vivified by our reading of the Scriptures. Our education and catechesis have their basis in a desire to make known and to know the God who seeks to reveal himself and call us into relationship with Himself. We have dire need of a constant reappraisal of how we are sustained and nourished by the Sacred Page.

In short, Catholic Biblical scholars will also have service of the People of God as a trait. We need the techniques of the Academy and the weight of scholarship behind us, but an essential aspect of the Catholic Biblical scholar will be this work of formation of the People of God in the Word of God. A famous text of St Therese of Lisieux asks what would happen if the martyrs were to lose courage, if the confessors were to lose their words, if the mercy-workers were to become too tired? This could happen if the Scriptures are not at the heart of the Church. They breathe life into the Church. The Catholic Scholar is marked by a service of this reality.

“Into the complex knot...”

I take the inspiration for this last section from the recently published book, *A cause de Jésus* by Joseph Doré, former bishop of Strasbourg. In short, this book is a very personal account of why he has continued to be a Christian and a Catholic priest. Very early, he acknowledges that he belongs to Catholicism, which is, in his words, “a complex knot of faith and history”. It is a very sincere book which looks at the role of faith in the world in which we live and how faith must confront realities and ask questions which it has never had to affront before. He epitomizes the journey of so many of us who want to stay faithful to this faith and who want to offer this faith and all the beauty that goes with it to others but who have to ask some difficult and searching questions, “vexing questions” as he calls them.

Catholic teaching and theology has to ask these questions in a way that it has never had to do before. We face, in the countries that have been for centuries the bedrock of Catholicism, new challenges and new confusion. Many of us belong to those who want to be faithful and true to our Tradition and to our Faith in the midst of these questions, but find ourselves often at a loss to see where and how to proceed before many of these issues. With the massive diminishment in the numbers of consecrated persons, our engagement in education, care, contemplation and mission has diminished and will further diminish drastically. With the fall in numbers for ordination, pastoral ministry is in difficulty and has been reduced in many cases to nominal administration rather than a true care of communities. As people become more disengaged from practice, several generations have no sense of Catholic culture. We are losing our “heroes” who offered prophetic witness and they do not seem to be replaced. Added to this are the revelations in recent years of sexual and institutional abuse. As Catholicism’s credibility wanes, our

⁷ Bechard, 306.

theology finds it more and more difficult to offer adequate responses to the very real questions that we face.

My question: how do we read the Scriptures into this new reality?

As you can imagine, there is no simple answer to this question. I would like to reply however, with two simple reflections from my own studies over the last few years.

I study the Book of Psalms. My hope is to offer a reading of the Book of Psalms that recognizes the complex unity of the book in terms of a search for Wisdom through an appreciation of the gift of Torah, God's teaching or more commonly called "the Law". Over the last while, as I read more into this complex collection of prayer and poetry, I appreciate more and more the utter humanity of these poems. They are composed of the tears and laughter, the sadness and the sorrow, the hope and the thanks of very real people in situations of Exile, sickness, relief, hope and fear. These are formulated into prayer and offered in the Temple as part of the worship of the People of God.

This leads me to my first reflection. **The Word of God bears the scars of humanity.** As surely as the Word-made-flesh knew the whip, the lance and the nails, so the Word in letters also knew and continues to know "the joys and the hopes, the fears and the sorrows"⁸ of humanity. Perhaps this is a very opportune moment to read Scripture. We may not find therein answers to our problems. We may not find a map to a better place. However, we may well find a living Word that knows the chaos of our times. It might be a good idea to sit by the rivers and hang up our harps for a while, and ask, ask, ask "how can we sing the Lord's song in this strange land?"! It is through this reading of Scripture into our life situations and indeed into the crisis of our times that we might reach the path to a Wisdom that assures us of the balance of God's presence. It was so for the generations who formed the tradition of the Psalms as elements of the Temple worship, so it may be also for us.

My second reflection comes from my own lived experience as a priest in the Church and is directed towards that. The three pillars of priestly identity in the Church are a ministry of the Word, a sacramental ministry and pastoral charity. All of priestly identity fits into these realities and these realities need to be formed, I firm believe, by a very deep and intense formation in Scripture. Ministry *to* the Word, in prayer and study is an absolute requisite for ministry *of* the Word in preaching, teaching and catechesis. Sacramental ministry is inadequate if not accompanied by a deep consciousness of the Scriptural words becoming effective in the sacred moment of the sacraments. Pastoral charity is nothing more than a rendering present of Christ to his people in their need. Ignorance of Christ comes from an ignorance of the Scriptures, therefore, to truly make Christ present to others, one must encounter him in the Living Word that makes him known.

A general maxim has always been that what is true of priests is true of the Church. If the Church will truly undertake its role to be the prophetic and sacramental presence of Christ in the world today, then, I believe, we must take seriously the formation of all Catholics in Sacred Scripture. Pastoral psychology will go so far. Strategies and plans

⁸ GS, 1

have their place. The essence of what it is to be a Catholic Christian lies in a profound and intense listening to the God who speaks to us through these pages. This is the golden strand in the complex knot of faith and history that is the Catholic faith.

Sean Maher