

## *Dei Verbum*: Scripture, Tradition, and Historical Criticism

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*The Council Fathers at Vatican II struggled to negotiate the Council's teaching on divine revelation with regard to the teaching of Trent, but more immediately with regard to the modern theology of the Magisterium and the modern value of historical criticism that had recently been recognized by Pius XII as having a legitimate role in the interpretation of Scripture. Dei Verbum's teaching stressed the unity of Scripture and tradition in the revelation of God's word, but never considered the role of historical criticism in the interpretation of God's word in tradition that it affirmed in God's revelation in the biblical word. This article argues that the recognition of the legitimate role of historical criticism in the interpretation of tradition remains an issue of needed development in the teaching of Dei Verbum.*

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OF the four documents the Second Vatican Council issued in the authoritative genre of “constitution,” *Dei Verbum* (“Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” [1965]) alone presented a teaching that negotiated a long-held dogmatic precedent in conciliar teaching. Neither *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (“Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” [1963]) nor *Gaudium et Spes* (“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” [1965]) had any conciliar teaching precedent at all. *Lumen Gentium* (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” [1965]) did have a conciliar precedent in Vatican I’s ecclesiological teaching *Pastor Aeternus* (1870),

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though one that was recent and narrowly focused on the issue of papal authority.

*Dei Verbum*, on the other hand, is a document that largely tries to clarify doctrinally what the Church had long held as basic belief and as defined conciliar teaching. The belief in God's revelation was so basic to Christian faith that it passed from the early Church through the medieval tradition as uncontested truth until the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century challenged what had taken shape as its distinctively Catholic appropriation. Medieval Christianity gradually developed a belief in an extra-biblical scriptural tradition that complemented and clarified the meaning of God's revelation in biblical writings, and to such a degree that these extra-biblical writings—the dogmatic teachings of ecumenical councils, the faithful works of respected theologians, and papal decretals—were believed to share in the authority of divine revelation itself. Moreover, medieval Christianity affirmed an unwritten tradition of beliefs and practices that it believed had originated in the apostolic Church and so shared too in the truth of divine revelation.<sup>1</sup> The Reformers objected to the breadth of this Catholic understanding of divine revelation, rejecting nearly all forms of tradition as sinful human invention and insisting that believers truly encounter God's revelation in biblical scripture alone.

In opposition to this Protestant stance, on April 8, 1546, the Council of Trent approved the first conciliar teaching on Scripture and the apostolic tradition:

The holy ecumenical and general council of Trent, lawfully assembled in the holy Spirit,... keeps ever before its eyes this purpose: that the purity of the gospel, purged of all errors, may be preserved in the church. Our lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, first proclaimed with his own lips this gospel, which had in the past been promised by the prophets in the sacred scriptures; then he bade it be preached to every creature through his apostles as the source [*fontem*] of the whole truth of salvation and rule of conduct. The council clearly perceives that this truth and rule are contained in written books [*libris scriptis*] and in unwritten traditions [*sine scripto traditionibus*] which were received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or else have come down to us, handed on as it were from the apostles themselves at the inspiration of the holy Spirit. Following the example of the orthodox fathers, the council accepts and venerates with a like feeling of piety and reverence [*pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia*] all the books both of the old and the new Testament, since the one God is the author of both, as well as the traditions concerning

<sup>1</sup> Here I follow the reading of George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959).

both faith and conduct [*tum ad fidem, tum ad mores pertinentes*], as either directly spoken by Christ or dictated by the holy Spirit, which have been preserved in unbroken sequence in the catholic church.<sup>2</sup>

From the preparation of the conciliar agenda to the composition of the draft texts on divine revelation, to the final approval of *Dei Verbum* on November 18, 1965, all who had a hand in the composition of the Council's teaching on divine revelation took for granted that their task was the clarification and refinement of the dogmatic teaching of Trent.

But why the need for such a clarification of Trent's four-hundred-year-old conciliar precedent on divine revelation? Given Trent's definitive teaching, why did the topic of divine revelation find a place on the agenda of the Council at all? I will argue that two issues pressed on the still Tridentine imagination of the Church on the eve of Vatican II that required further development in the Church's doctrine of divine revelation: first, the more recent ecclesial practice of the Magisterium as a living embodiment of the tradition of the Church, and second, the recent papal approval of a role for historical criticism in the interpretation of sacred Scripture. We shall see that these issues and their implications were not at all clear in the consciousness of the Church on the eve of the Council, but that its teaching on Scripture, tradition, and the issue of historical criticism gradually came to definition in the rather circuitous preparatory history of *Dei Verbum*.

In these pages, I will begin by considering how the debate about "sources" of divine revelation in the successive drafts of *Dei Verbum* finally secured a conciliar teaching on the integrity of tradition as a mode of divine revelation, a teaching that, unlike Trent's, reified the authoritative role of the Magisterium in identifying and developing that tradition. I will continue by noting that *Dei Verbum* refuses to recognize the same legitimate role for historical criticism in the interpretation of the word of God in magisterial tradition that it accords to the word of God in sacred Scripture. I will conclude by pressing for the need for that very recognition.

### **The "Sources" of Revelation, Constitutive Tradition, and Magisterial Authority**

Scholars have well documented the debate and revisionary process leading to the approval of *Dei Verbum*. Pope John XXIII assigned the preparatory work on divine revelation to the Theological Commission under the

<sup>2</sup> "First Decree of the Council of Trent," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2: *Trent to Vatican II*, ed. N. P. Tanner, SJ (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 663.

direction of Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani. By October 1960, the Theological Commission's secretary, Sebastien Tromp, had prepared a summary schema on divine revelation entitled "On the Sources of Revelation" (*De Fontibus Revelationis*). The title reflected a concern of the pope himself that the conciliar teaching specifically address the sources of divine revelation.<sup>3</sup> This conceptualization of divine revelation as having "sources," two in number, evinces the degree to which the initial preparatory work for the doctrinal teaching of the Council conveyed long-standing Tridentine assumptions.

As we have seen, the Council of Trent taught that God's revelation is contained in "written books and in the unwritten traditions that the apostles received from Christ himself or that were handed on..." a teaching that condemned the Protestant Scripture principle that, in Catholic judgment, reduced God's revelation to the biblical words. The debate at Trent that preceded this formulation struggled for the proper way to convey this two-fold communication of God's revelation. In its own way, that debate considered and avoided a "two sources" conceptualization. An earlier draft of Trent's teaching had proposed that God's revelation was "partly [*partim*] contained in written books, partly [*partim*] in unwritten traditions."<sup>4</sup> But on the Council floor, a number of Fathers argued that the "partim ... partim" conceptualization was deficient for two related reasons: it suggested that there were two sources of God's truth in revelation and that each of these sources—written books and unwritten traditions—was in itself incomplete. This objection carried the day in Trent's final teaching that the apostles, who passed on the saving truth of Christ's gospel, are the one source of divine revelation and that the saving truth is contained in written books *and* in unwritten traditions. Here, the victory of the conjunction ("and") over the adverb ("partly") expresses at the very least the Council's unwillingness to apportion revelational truth to its written and unwritten dimensions.

If Trent had already negotiated the issue of "sources" of revelation, and the Council Fathers at Vatican II were intent on faithfulness to Trent's dogmatic precedent, then why did the "sources" conceptualization surface again in the preparatory work of the Council and as an express wish of the pope highlighted in the earliest title of the draft text on divine revelation? Answering this question will have us briefly consider the history of Catholic theology from Trent to the eve of Vatican II.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Struggle for the Council during the Preparation of Vatican II (1960–1962)," in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 1, ed. G. Alberigo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 227–30.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Edmond Ortigues, "Écritures et traditions apostoliques au Concile de Trente," *Recherches de science religieuse* 36 (1949): 279.

In the four hundred years between Trent and Vatican II, there were several developments in Catholic theology that made the “two sources” conceptualization of revelation attractive and, in some respects, irresistible. The Council of Trent drew a line between what it believed to be the true teaching of the Church of Christ and the errors of the Protestant confessions. On the Roman side of that line stood Trent’s teaching on divine revelation. It is simply axiomatic for all Christian confessions that theology is the clarifying exposition of God’s revelation. The teaching of Trent on divine revelation set an authoritative direction for theology in the long heritage of Trent. Against the Protestant claim that theology is the exposition of Scripture alone, Tridentine Catholicism understood theology to be the exposition of God’s revelation in Scripture and tradition. Catholics and Protestants agreed that Holy Scripture was God’s inspired word. It was the authority accorded to tradition as divine revelation that distinctively shaped the Tridentine understanding of Catholic theology, a distinctiveness marked by polemical difference. In this Tridentine heritage, there was no memory of the debates at Trent regarding the unacceptability of the “*partim ... partim*” formulation. Moreover, Trent’s teaching that God’s revealed truth was contained in Scripture and tradition eclipsed its careful formulation that these modes of divine revelation had but one source in the gospel taught by Christ and passed on to the Church by the apostles. The duality that distinguished Catholic belief on revelation and that authorized authentic Catholic theology was readily imagined as a duality of sources, each of which “partly” conveyed God’s revealed truth. As Yves Congar has observed, Catholic controversialists after Trent—Martin Perez de Ayala, Peter Canisius, and Robert Bellarmine among them—defended its teaching by appealing to the “*partim ... partim*” conceptualization, and this understanding of divine revelation persisted from the Catholic Baroque period, through the nineteenth century, to the eve of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>5</sup>

The development of the practice, and so of the authority, of the Magisterium in this same Tridentine heritage buttressed the “two sources” conceptualization. Trent’s teaching on tradition was as much an anti-Protestant defense of the authority of the pope and the bishops as it was a repudiation of the Protestant Scripture principle. This defense of papal authority was ardent in the polemical atmosphere of Tridentine theology, and, arguably, itself contributed to the extension of magisterial authority in the modern period. The use of the term “magisterium” to describe the exercise of the teaching authority of the pope and bishops appeared for the first

<sup>5</sup> Yves M.-J. Congar, OP, *La Tradition et les traditions*, vol. 1: *Essai historique* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1960), 215, 227–28, n. 40.

time in late-eighteenth-century theology and peppered the vocabulary of nineteenth-century German canonists.<sup>6</sup> This new naming reflected a new theological reality in papal practice. From the eighteenth-century pontificate of Benedict XIV, popes increasingly published encyclical letters as exercises of their teaching authority. With the practice of regularly written papal teachings from the late eighteenth century to our own times, the very notion of tradition as past belief and practice was supplemented by an understanding of tradition as the living voice of the Magisterium. The Tridentine consolidation of papal authority reached a doctrinal apex in Vatican I's *Pastor Aeternus* (1870), which defined the dogma of papal infallibility.

It was this Tridentine understanding of a robustly authoritative tradition, mediated to twentieth-century Catholicism through the more recent events of Vatican I, the Modernist controversy, manualist varieties of neo-Thomism, and the practice of the Magisterium that made the "two sources" conceptualization of divine revelation still viable on the eve of Vatican II. In many respects, it defined the Catholic appropriation of the doctrine of revelation in the four-hundred-year heritage of Trent.

The "two sources" conceptualization, however, proved to be a neuralgic issue at Vatican II as theologians and bishops expressed strong reservations about the preparatory document *De Fontibus*. First among the failings of the draft text in the view of its critics was that it seemed to take a decided stand on what many considered still to be an open theological question: Is the content of God's revelation in Holy Scripture complete? A number of Catholic theologians in the 1950s, most notably the German Josef Rupert Geiselmann, answered this question affirmatively.<sup>7</sup> More technically framed as the question of the material sufficiency of Scripture, this issue had important implications for a theology of revelation. Maintaining, as Geiselmann did, that Scripture sufficiently presented the content of God's revelation did not entail the diminishment of tradition as a mode of revelation, though it did suggest that Scripture measured tradition in a way that tradition could never measure Scripture, as though tradition stood in a relationship of discipleship to Scripture. Defending the material sufficiency of Scripture implicitly challenged the "two sources" conceptualization, which in the Tridentine

<sup>6</sup> Yves Congar, "A Semantic History of the Term 'Magisterium,'" in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 3: The Magisterium and Morality*, ed. C. Curran and R. McCormick, SJ (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 306.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Josef Rupert Geiselmann, "Das Missverständnis über das Verhältnis von Schrift und Tradition und seine Überwindung in der katholischen Theologie," *Una Sancta* 11 (1956): 132–39; *Die Heilige Schrift und die Tradition* (Freiburg: Herder, 1962).

heritage had valorized the integrity of tradition to such a degree that it could be imagined to have a material sufficiency of its own.

Nearly a year before the opening of the Council, on November 9, 1961, the Central Preparatory Commission met to discuss the latest draft of *De Fontibus Revelationis*. As Ottaviani and Tromp defended the work of the Theological Commission, several bishops, among them the influential Cardinal Augustin Bea, criticized what they found to be its neo-Scholastic cast, its tendency to understand revelation as a body of propositions authorized by the Church, and the un-ecumenical tone of its disciplinary paragraphs condemning false views. The meeting ended with a large majority of the bishops in attendance calling for further revisions in anticipation of the discussion of the text at the upcoming Council.<sup>8</sup> By the time the Council began, there was still substantial opposition to the text. As *De Fontibus* was about to be discussed on the floor of the Council in November 1962, German theologians Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger strategically intervened to oppose the draft by distributing hundreds of copies of an alternative schema they wrote entitled *De Revelatione Dei et Hominis in Jesu Christo Facta*. This text turned the discussion of the doctrine in a very different direction by presenting revelation not as a body of teaching but rather as an event in the universal history of salvation, as God's saving disposition toward humanity.<sup>9</sup> Christ, the theologians insisted, is the fullness of that revelation, which the sacred Scriptures preserve. The church, properly understood, is the servant of those inspired writings. And while the Rahner-Ratzinger text avowed the Magisterium's authority in explaining the meaning of the Scriptures and their present relevance, any talk of "two sources" of revelation that would reify magisterial authority was strikingly absent.<sup>10</sup>

Members of the Theological Commission saw the Rahner-Ratzinger intervention as an attempt to subvert their work, and rightly so. Rahner, in fact, judged *De Fontibus* to be so problematic that he even proposed that the Council Fathers discard the text and turn to another schema not beset with its shortcomings.<sup>11</sup> Discussion of the preparatory text on revelation began

<sup>8</sup> Karim Schelkens, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II: A Redaction History of the Schema de Fontibus Revelationis (1960–1962)* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2010), 221–63.

<sup>9</sup> Komonchak, "The Struggle for the Council during the Preparation of Vatican II (1960–1962)," 244; Jared Wicks, SJ, "Vatican II on Revelation—From Behind the Scenes," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 646–47.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 647. For another account of episcopal resistance to *De Fontibus*, see Jared Wicks, "Peter Smulders and *Dei Verbum*: 2. On *De Fontibus Revelationis* during Vatican II's First Period, 1962," *Gregorianum* 82 (2001): 559–93.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald P. Fogarty, "The Council Gets Underway," in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, ed. G. Alberigo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 73.

on November 14, 1962, and after several days of protracted debate a substantial majority of the Council Fathers voted against the draft schema. Even though the opposition did not reach a threshold of two-thirds, Pope John XXIII declared on November 21 that *De Fontibus* would be withdrawn and another draft text prepared to address the concerns expressed in the debates of the previous days.

The pope entrusted the ongoing work on revelation to a joint group represented by members of the Theological Commission and the Secretariat for Christian Unity, which by now functioned also as a conciliar commission. The involvement of the Secretariat, under the direction of Bea, assured that the Council's teaching on divine revelation would have a pastoral cast and be ecumenically sensitive. This new direction moved away from a preoccupation with the right relationship between Scripture and tradition, accented the place of the doctrine of divine revelation in the Christian mystery, and attended to the pastoral implications of biblical and liturgical renewal for the doctrine of revelation.<sup>12</sup>

In March 1963, the joint commission produced a new, second draft entitled *De Divina Revelatione*, which was sent to the bishops of the world for their response. Their concerns were addressed in a third draft, issued in April 1964, that definitively broke the mold first set by *De Fontibus* and addressed the doctrine of revelation in a fresh way. The final text of *Dei Verbum*, Gregory Baum has noted, "was not to be substantially different from this third draft."<sup>13</sup>

As Hanjo Sauer has observed, by the time the third draft appeared for debate at the Council's third session in fall 1964, the text had largely become a teaching "on the significance of the Bible in the Church."<sup>14</sup> The draft's final chapters, 3 through 6, addressed the divine inspiration of Scripture, scriptural interpretation, the Old and New Testaments, and the place of Holy Scripture in the life of the Church. A second chapter on the transmission of revelation in Scripture and tradition followed an opening chapter on revelation as a gratuitous act of God's self-communication. The text sidestepped any attempt to settle the question of the material sufficiency of Scripture. The joint commission that produced it had long jettisoned the "two sources" conceptualization. Although the Council Fathers largely appreciated the revised document, the debate at the third session did raise some issues judged to be in need of address. Perhaps it should not be surprising

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory Baum, OSA, "Vatican II's Constitution on Revelation: History and Interpretation," *Theological Studies* 28 (1967): 52.

<sup>14</sup> Hanjo Sauer, "The Doctrinal and the Pastoral: The Text on Divine Revelation," in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, ed. G. Alberigo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 195.



that some of them again raised the specter of the “two sources” conceptualization.

The conciliar Doctrinal Commission assumed responsibility for the third draft prior to its presentation at the third session, and in its discussions some members questioned the adequacy of its treatment of tradition. When debate began on the Council floor on October 2, 1964, conservatives raised the same question. Summarily expressed, their concern centered on the unwillingness of the framers of the third draft to recognize a “constitutive” tradition, that is, a dimension of tradition that possessed its own specific and authoritative content as divine revelation. Even though the third draft avoided the issue of the material sufficiency of Scripture, the conservatives, among them Cardinal Ernesto Ruffini and Bishop Frane Franic, charged that the text implicitly took a stand in favor of that neuralgic issue. No one, they insisted, could claim that all of the teachings of tradition could directly be justified by appeal to Scripture. The silence of the text on this matter, they averred, neglected an undeniable truth of faith and, more, distorted the Council’s authentic teaching by reducing tradition to the content of Scripture or to Scripture’s interpretive history. In other words, the conservatives feared that dissatisfaction with the “two sources” understanding, driven partially by ecumenical concerns, had led the majority to affirm that there were not two “means” for the transmission of revelation, each with its own real integrity.<sup>15</sup> After the third session debate, the Doctrinal Commission made some minor changes to the third draft and distributed the revised text to the Council Fathers. The changes did not address the minority plea for acknowledging a constitutive tradition. This text, acceptable to a significant majority, advanced to the floor for approval at the Council’s fourth session in fall 1965.

The debate surrounding what we can now call *Dei Verbum* at the fourth session presumed the final approval of the text because so many bishops favored the result of what they witnessed over the course of three years as a living example of the development of doctrine. Nonetheless, the old concern about the integrity of a constitutive tradition, and with it the role of the Magisterium as a living voice of tradition, remained. The issue surfaced repeatedly in the debate on the floor, appeared in numerous proposals for amendment, and finally occasioned the intervention of Pope Paul VI, who presided over the Council after the death of John XXIII on June 3, 1963. The majority, both in the Doctrinal Commission and on the Council floor, feared that any amendment that proposed a revision of the relationship between Scripture and tradition at this late stage would upset the delicate

<sup>15</sup> For a historical sketch of these debates, see *ibid.*, 203–18.

balance that the third draft achieved and risk the approval that seemed so close. The conservative minority, however, feared that the final draft compromised the very distinctiveness of the Catholic doctrine of revelation. Buoyed by the concerns of the conservatives and undeterred by the polite warning of Cardinal Josef Frings that a direct papal intervention on a debated issue would diminish the teaching, Paul VI sent a handwritten note to the Council Fathers on October 17, 1965, affirming his duty as pontiff to “work for the improvement of the text by timely suggestions,” an intervention, he explained, that was “no attack ... on the authority of the Council.”<sup>16</sup> In accordance with the pope’s wishes, a revised draft would include a brief acknowledgment of a constitutive tradition.<sup>17</sup>

Finally approved by an overwhelming majority on November 18, 1965, the “problem-child of the Council”<sup>18</sup> managed to maintain faithfulness to the teaching of Trent while yet negotiating a way through all the issues that attended the Tridentine tradition’s developing doctrine of magisterial authority. *Dei Verbum*’s first chapter on “revelation in itself” portrays revelation eventfully, as an act of divine self-communication that “unfolds through deeds and words.”<sup>19</sup> Chapter 2, on “the transmission of divine revelation,” takes up what proved to be the difficult issue of the relationship between Scripture and tradition. The Savior entrusted his gospel, “a universal source [*fontem*] of saving truth and moral teaching,”<sup>20</sup> to his apostles, who handed on what they had received to the Church. Some of these apostles, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, “committed the message of salvation to

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Christophe Theobald, “The Church under the Word of God,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 5, ed. G. Alberigo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 330.

<sup>17</sup> Another issue that merited the pope’s attention was a disagreement about the draft’s wording that scripture teaches “saving truth” (*veritas salutaris*). Those who objected argued that the phrase narrowed Scripture’s divine inspiration only to some of its teachings. Those who defended the phrase saw the notation of truth’s specificity as a way of sidestepping a fundamentalist notion of scriptural inerrancy. The Fathers approved a compromise formula in the final text: “we must acknowledge that the books of scripture teach firmly, faithfully and without error such truth as God, for the sake of our salvation, wished the biblical text to contain” (“Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, 976, §11 [hereafter abbreviated *DV* = *Dei Verbum*, followed by page number in the Tanner edition, and the document’s paragraph enumeration]).

<sup>18</sup> J. Neuner, “Das Schema über die Offenbarung,” in *KNA—Sonderdienst zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil* 56 (Oktober 6, 1964), 5, quoted in Sauer, “The Doctrinal and the Pastoral,” 202.

<sup>19</sup> *DV*, 972, §2.

<sup>20</sup> *DV*, 973, §7.

writing.”<sup>21</sup> The apostles in turn handed on their office as teachers to the bishops so that “the gospel should be preserved in the church for ever living and integral.” Within this apostolic continuity, “this sacred tradition and the sacred scripture of the two testaments are like a mirror in which the church, during its pilgrimage of earth, contemplates God, the source of all that it has received, until it is brought home to see him face to face as he is.”<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, there is no direct appeal to Trent’s rubric of “*unwritten traditions*,” a testimony, perhaps, to the more recent exercise of magisterial authority through literary teaching. Instead, *Dei Verbum* speaks of the apostolic heritage as “everything that helps the people of God to live a holy life and to grow in faith,” as “all that the [church] is and all that it believes.”<sup>23</sup>

The document only nods toward the relatively new notion of doctrinal development, which entered the Church’s reflection in the work of nineteenth-century Catholic theologians. Guided by the Holy Spirit, tradition “progresses in the church.” There is “growth,” not in tradition’s objective truthfulness but in the Church’s “understanding of what is handed on.”<sup>24</sup> In a passage that echoes *Lumen Gentium*’s teaching on the supernatural *sensus fidei* possessed by all the faithful,<sup>25</sup> the document describes this understanding as flourishing “through contemplation and study by believers,... through the intimate understanding of spiritual things which they experience.” The “sure charism of truth” received by the bishops confirms this growth in understanding tradition’s riches as time moves toward its eschatological fulfillment. Through tradition, “the scripture itself comes to be more profoundly understood and to realise its power in the church.” In tradition, the spirit of God “is active, making the living voice of the gospel ring out in the church, and through it in the world, leading those who believe into the whole truth....”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, there is in the teaching of the council a kind of perichoretic relationship between Scripture and tradition:

Sacred tradition and scripture are bound together in a close and reciprocal relationship. They both flow from the same divine wellspring, merge together to some extent, and are on course towards the same end. Scripture is the utterance of God as it is set down in writing under the guidance of God’s Spirit; tradition preserves the word of God as it was entrusted

<sup>21</sup> *DV*, 974, §7.

<sup>22</sup> *DV*, 974, §7.

<sup>23</sup> *DV*, 974, §8.

<sup>24</sup> *DV*, 974, §8.

<sup>25</sup> “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2: *Trent to Vatican II*, 858, §12.

<sup>26</sup> *DV*, 974, §8.

to the apostles by Christ our lord and the holy Spirit, and transmits it to their successors, so that these in turn, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, may faithfully preserve, expound and disseminate the word by their preaching.<sup>27</sup>

Even though “tradition and scripture together form a single sacred deposit of the word of God,”<sup>28</sup> each yet possesses its own integrity. The manifest and plain meaning of Scripture’s many words, the compellingly truthful cast of the canonical narrative, and the sacred story’s culmination in the gospels’ rendition of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus not only set forth the biblical content but also preeminently supply the content of tradition. Yet, in the words added to the document’s final draft to ensure the affirmation of a “constitutive” tradition, “the church’s certainty about all that is revealed is not drawn from holy scripture alone.”<sup>29</sup> Quoting Trent’s teaching on divine revelation, the text affirms the belief that “both scripture and tradition are to be accepted and honoured with like devotion and reverence.”<sup>30</sup> Chapter 2 concludes by reiterating the Church’s long-held conviction that the Magisterium has been entrusted with “the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether in its written form or in that of tradition.” The Magisterium is “not above the word of God but stands at its service, teaching nothing but what is handed down....”<sup>31</sup>

*Dei Verbum*’s remaining chapters, 3 through 6, articulate the Church’s teaching on God’s revelation in Scripture. Chapter 4 affirms the tradition’s age-old belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture but now contextualizes Scripture’s inerrancy by noting the need for interpreters to attend to the biblical authors whom God chose to convey God’s truthful revelation. Here the Council Fathers promulgate the teaching of Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), which recognized the validity of the historical-critical dimensions of the exegetical task, while yet insisting that such criticism finally serves a spiritual reading of Scripture. “If the interpreter of holy scripture is to understand what God has wished to communicate to us,” the document avers, “[the interpreter] must carefully investigate what meaning the biblical writers actually had in mind; that will also be what God chose to manifest through their words.” The exegete must weigh the context of literary genre in the communication of meaning “because truth is presented and expressed differently” in such genres. Any historical

<sup>27</sup> *DV*, 974–75, §9.

<sup>28</sup> *DV*, 975, §10.

<sup>29</sup> *DV*, 975, §9.

<sup>30</sup> *DV*, 975, §9.

<sup>31</sup> *DV*, 975, §10.

information that elucidates the biblical author's "time," "particular circumstances," "social conventions," and "characteristic ways of feeling, speaking and storytelling" clarifies, as well, the truth of God's revelation in Scripture. Finally, though, such knowledge, the fruit of critical study, flourishes meaningfully in "the content and coherence of scripture as a whole, taking into account the whole church's living tradition and the sense of perspective given by faith."<sup>32</sup>

In closing, the document addresses the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible in chapters 4 and 5, respectively, their treatment presented as an account of the canonical plot of Christian salvation. "Thus God," the Fathers attest, following the time-honored teaching of Augustine, "has brought it about in his wisdom that the new Testament should be hidden in the old, and the old Testament should be made manifest in the new."<sup>33</sup> *Dei Verbum's* final chapter, "Holy Scripture in the Life of the Church," authorizes and encourages access to the Scriptures on the part of all the faithful, a commendation that would have smacked of Protestant error in the previous four-hundred-year Tridentine heritage. Here, however, the Council claims, "there is such power and force in the word of God that it stands as the church's support and strength, affording her children sturdiness in faith, food for the soul and a pure and unfailing fount of spiritual life."<sup>34</sup>

### **Historicity and the Divine Word**

I have proposed that the Council Fathers authored and approved *Dei Verbum* in order to negotiate the precedent of Trent's teaching on divine revelation with regard to two modern developments: the theology of the Magisterium that took shape in the Tridentine tradition and the Church's recent teaching that historical criticism possessed a legitimate role in the interpretation of Scripture. Ironically, the Tridentine theology of the Magisterium developed in neuralgic opposition to the critical spirit of modernity that, with papal approval, entered biblical scholarship in the assumptions and procedures of the historical-critical method. Thus, in the teaching of *Dei Verbum*, one encounters a tension in the Church's yet unresolved relationship to the intellectual values of the Enlightenment that Catholic Christianity, especially in the conservative energies of the Magisterium, had resisted for one hundred and fifty years.

<sup>32</sup> *DV*, 976, §12.

<sup>33</sup> *DV*, 977, §16.

<sup>34</sup> *DV*, 979, §21.

Perhaps most threatening to the Christian worldview was the Enlightenment understanding of history as a temporal realm free of divine intervention. Even if any number of Enlightenment thinkers were willing to invoke the agency of a deistic god to explain the origin of the universe, few were willing to allow this god any efficacy at all in the day-to-day unfolding of events in time. Divine providence was set at odds with the Enlightenment confidence in the capacity of autonomous human reason to assume responsibility for the ongoing shape of history, a history empty of miracles required to remedy the human weakness and sinful need that Enlightenment anthropology denied. This antisupernaturalist, historical understanding of time gave rise to secular modes of inquiry and explanation that justified events through reason alone. The burgeoning discipline of physics offered a purely empirical account of natural occurrences. Historical criticism as a modern scientific method took shape as Enlightenment interpreters aimed critical reason at the biblical text to expose its inconsistencies, its blatant contradictions, and, finally, what the rationalist interpreters judged to be its supernatural impossibilities. Historical-critical explanation also made church history its target. Historical studies demonstrated that Christian claims for an original apostolic truth complete from the beginning and unchangingly continuous in tradition were baseless. Instead, historical inquiry showed that Christian beliefs and doctrines, even the most basic claims of the faith instantiated in the ancient creeds, slowly achieved their orthodox form through winding paths of historical change. Enlightenment historicism, with its expectation that formal reasoning was the timeless measure of temporal events, thus challenged the most foundational bastions of Christian authority in Scripture and tradition themselves.

There were two Christian responses to this compelling Enlightenment critique of divine revelation prior to Vatican II. The first sought rapprochement with the historical sensibilities of modern culture. Some Catholic theologians of the early nineteenth century—Johann Sebastian Drey (1777–1853), Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838), and John Henry Newman (1801–1890)—found a theological resource in the Romantic movement's appreciation of historical time as a realm of productive, truthful development. These theologians formulated the first theories of doctrinal development by acknowledging the Enlightenment's evidence of traditional change but now interpreted that change not as an affront to the continuity of apostolic truth but rather as the very way the Holy Spirit brings the Church to a fuller clarity of divine revelation.<sup>35</sup> These early theories of doctrinal development could be, and were,

<sup>35</sup> For an account of these early theories of doctrinal development, see John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 59–72.

put to liberal or conservative theological use, though it is fair to say that they tended to garner the suspicion of the Magisterium if only as a gesture of accommodation. One finds another example of rapprochement with the historical sensibilities of modern culture in the theologies of the so-called “modernists” at the turn of the twentieth century. These theologians—Alfred Loisy (1857–1940) and George Tyrell (1861–1909), among others—pressed historical claims not only into the content of Catholic dogma but also into the method of theology itself in an effort to reconcile theology and the critical standards of scientific method. These two examples of the response of rapprochement had different fates in Catholicism’s struggles with modernity. Whereas the principle of doctrinal development eventually became axiomatic in modern Catholic theology, Pope Pius X’s encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907) condemned the theology of the modernists as the “synthesis of all heresies,”<sup>36</sup> judging its insidious alliance with historical understanding to be a betrayal of the timeless truth that theology properly guards.

The second Christian response to the Enlightenment critique of divine revelation was some variety of fundamentalism, which, we should recall, is an antimodern, modern phenomenon. By fundamentalism, I mean a style of religious belief and practice that regards historical consciousness and critical reasoning as threatening to the truth claims of tradition. In Catholic Christianity, we can see its manifestations in Pius IX’s *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), in Vatican I’s definition of papal infallibility, in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century expectation of neo-Thomistic normativity, and in the suspicion of the *nouvelle théologie* on the eve of Vatican II by neo-Scholastic theologians and the Magisterium. This fundamentalist approach to the Enlightenment critique of divine revelation was simply one of denial. The Church judged modern, secular values to be irreligious and so irreconcilable with the gospel message, the very content of Christ’s revelation. If the Church could not avoid modernity’s historical commitments as they flourished in the culture at large, then, the Magisterium imagined, the Church could at least do all in its power to insulate itself from modernity’s deleterious influence, seeking refuge in a classical and idealized Catholic past.

We find these two responses to modern historical understanding in the Church on the eve of Vatican II. In some respects, we might explain the constructive history of *Dei Verbum* through its various drafts as a shift from the response of fundamentalism to the response of a tempered rapprochement. Vatican I, we should recall, promulgated a teaching on divine revelation that reiterated the teaching of Trent but now with an anti-Enlightenment

<sup>36</sup> Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907), in *The Papal Encyclicals: 1903–1939*, ed. C. Carlen (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Publishing, 1981), 89, §39.

addendum that stressed reason's capacity to know God "with certainty" by its own "natural power,"<sup>37</sup> the very power the Enlightenment had put to the service of religion's critique and now reclaimed as a function of the *imago Dei* in which God created humanity. The initial preparation for a conciliar teaching on divine revelation at Vatican II adopted this same fundamentalist approach, but now by the more insular route of defining authoritatively the "two sources" conceptualization of divine revelation. If successful, the conciliar approval of *De Fontibus Revelationis* would have configured the authority of the Magisterium even more decisively in an antimodernist cast. A confluence of so many factors militated against this result—among them, theological currents of reform on the eve of the Council, a growing consensus among the bishops regarding the pastoral deficiency of the traditional theology of revelation, and the way episcopal dissatisfaction with the initial draft enabled the bishops to claim their voice and to imagine anew what the Council might be and do. Another factor I would like to highlight here is the Church's growing, and otherwise anomalous, openness to historical-critical approaches to biblical exegesis.

Whereas the consolidation of magisterial authority marks the ninety-year period between the Vatican Councils, that same period witnessed a tentative acceptance of historical-critical contributions to the study of sacred Scripture. Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) had sternly criticized rationalist explanations of the Bible, which he often equated with "higher criticism" that, in his judgment, subverted Scripture's supernatural origin. Insisting on the absolute inspiration of the Bible, he adamantly condemned scholarly explanations of the sacred page that would limit the scope of its divine inspiration to create a space within which reason credibly and apologetically could locate historical or natural-scientific error. Yet, Leo conceded that historical and scientific studies had a legitimate role to play in exegesis, even if he imagined that the goal of such studies was the accumulation of knowledge to parry the thrusts of the rationalists.<sup>38</sup> Fifty years later, Pope Pius XII would confirm Leo's caution in his own encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), though unlike his predecessor he made unprecedented magisterial efforts to tout the value of historical criticism for the elucidation of Scripture itself. For Pius, advances in the method of historical criticism had now rendered Leo's earlier concerns about "higher criticism" passé:

<sup>37</sup> "Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith" (1870), in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, 806.

<sup>38</sup> Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), in *The Papal Encyclicals: 1878-1903*, ed. C. Carlen (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Publishing, 1981), 336-37, §21, 22.



It is scarcely necessary to observe that this criticism, which some fifty years ago not a few made use of quite arbitrarily and often in such wise that one would say they did so to introduce into the sacred text their own preconceived ideas, today has rules so firmly established and secure, that it has become a most valuable aid to the purer and more accurate editing of the sacred text and that any abuse can easily be discovered.<sup>39</sup>

In Pius' judgment, historical criticism as a discipline had risen to a state of "high perfection," which would enable the publication of Catholic editions of the Bible that will "unite the greatest reverence for the sacred text with an exact observance of all the rules of criticism."<sup>40</sup> *Divino Afflante Spiritu* commended the embrace of such modern methods of historical investigation to Catholic biblical scholars.

This new Catholic receptivity to one of the Enlightenment's great intellectual achievements, ironically the achievement that most effectively advanced its assault on the mainstays of Christian truth, helps us to understand why, from one perspective, the issue of divine revelation found its way onto the agenda of Vatican II. The first draft of *De Fontibus*, circulated in January 1961, divided the section on sacred Scripture into three chapters: one on biblical inspiration and inerrancy, a second on the testaments of the Bible, and a third on Scripture's "literary genres" (*de generibus literariis*). The first chapter acknowledged the importance of determining the biblical author's intentions through historical investigation, and the third chapter rehearsed *Divino Afflante Spiritu*'s support for the nascent method of form criticism in biblical studies. As much as *De Fontibus* was a traditionalist text, it presumed, as did the encyclical, that the exercise of historical criticism would not compromise but enhance biblical study, so long as criticism recognized its responsibility to the Magisterium.<sup>41</sup> This attention to the legitimacy of historical criticism remained in the final text of *De Fontibus* submitted for debate at the Council's first session in November 1962, and, three years later, in the approved text of *Dei Verbum*.<sup>42</sup> However much the Church's "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" changed shape in its circuitous journey toward final approval, its many authors seemed determined throughout to acknowledge the legitimate role of historical criticism in God's revelation in Scripture, and, by so doing, in this limited way found rapprochement with

<sup>39</sup> Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) in *The Papal Encyclicals: 1939–1958*, ed. C. Carlen (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Publishing, 1981), 70, §18.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 70, §19.

<sup>41</sup> Karim Schelkens, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II*, 143, 147.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 237, 259–60; *DV*, 976, §12.

the historical sensibilities of modernity. I would submit that one cannot say the same of *Dei Verbum's* teaching on the divine word in tradition.

### **How Far the Criticism of the Sacred Word?**

Is it not interesting that prior to Vatican II the Magisterium found a way to accommodate modern historical understanding in the interpretation of sacred Scripture and yet found no such accommodation of historical understanding in the interpretation of tradition? Is it not interesting that the abidingly contentious issue of debate in the years-long path to *Dei Verbum's* final approval was not its treatment of Scripture but its treatment of the Scripture-tradition relationship, especially with regard to concerns about the integrity of tradition as a mode of divine revelation? And is it not interesting that in the fifty-five years since the Council the Magisterium has not intervened even once to correct the work of a biblical scholar pertaining to the historical-critical interpretation of Scripture but has intervened many times to correct or censure the work of theologians regarding the interpretation of the doctrinal tradition? Perhaps in this consistent difference in the Council's treatment of Scripture, on the one hand, and tradition, on the other, we can identify the importance of *Dei Verbum* in the ongoing history of the Council's reception.

The Council of Trent first defined the Catholic teaching on tradition as a mode of divine revelation and the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the dogma with even greater nuance and clarity. But the Church's teaching on the authority of tradition stretches back in time through the Middle Ages and even further, arguably to the time of the early councils. Although I have portrayed the "two sources" conceptualization of *De Fontibus* as a reactionary response to a modern understanding of historicity and its implications for magisterial authority, it is important to note that this conceptualization predates the Enlightenment and appears in Catholic polemics against the Reformers even in the early sixteenth century.<sup>43</sup> The Fathers at Trent and Vatican II were unwilling to elevate the "two sources" conceptualization to conciliar definition, and we know in fine detail that this unwillingness took the form of explicit rejection in the case of Vatican II. A generous hermeneutics, however, would recognize that the "two sources" conceptualization abided over a period of four centuries because it so clearly expresses the distinctiveness of the long-held Catholic belief in tradition as a mode of divine revelation.

<sup>43</sup> An early sixteenth-century proponent was the Dominican Sylvester Prierias (1456–1527). See David V. N. Bagchi, *Luther's Earliest Opponents: Catholic Controversialists, 1518–1525* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 27–29, 59–60.

The editorial history of *Dei Verbum* demonstrates that liberal concerns worked to temper what were judged to be inappropriate accents in the conciliar expression of that belief. The argumentative role played by the issue of the material sufficiency of Scripture in checking the “two sources” conceptualization is a good example of this effort to rein in an exaggerated understanding of the authority of tradition, as is the sophisticated teaching of *Dei Verbum* itself, which ever portrays the relationship between Scripture and tradition as a mutual co-inherence. Yet, in the final moments of editorial progress toward approval, and against the wishes of the majority who argued that any late changes would threaten the final draft’s overwhelming episcopal support,<sup>44</sup> the minority advocates of a “constitutive” tradition successfully enlisted the pope’s intervention to have the final document affirm, “the church’s certainty about all that is revealed is not drawn from holy scripture alone.”

In my judgment, the addition of these words was a providential moment in Catholic tradition. These words, which recognize a constitutive tradition, explicitly acknowledge an age-old Catholic belief without which a dogmatic definition of divine revelation would be incomplete. Moreover, these words state a historical fact: not all that the Church affirms as revealed truth can be found in Scripture. In Catholic belief, tradition possesses an integrity as a mode of divine revelation that the late emendation expresses clearly and modestly. Yet, possessing an integrity of its own as a mode of divine revelation, tradition must reckon with the undeniably truthful implications of historical criticism, just as the Council judged Scripture must. Bent on tempering the possible excesses of magisterial authority and the iterative style of a positive theology in its service, the majority at the Council formulated a dogmatic teaching that accentuated the close ties between Scripture and tradition, as well as the Magisterium’s servant-role of responsibility to the word of God. In *Dei Verbum*, however, the Magisterium’s “task of authentically interpreting”<sup>45</sup> the divine word seems to imagine the meaning of the qualifying adverb as an exercise of the teaching office *ex opera operato*, as though the practice of Magisterium itself prescind from all the historical contingencies that *Dei Verbum* insists the reader of Scripture must take into account in order fully to engage God’s written word. The unfinished work of *Dei Verbum* in the postconciliar Church lies in the Magisterium’s need

<sup>44</sup> Theobald, “The Church under the Word of God,” 302, 304.

<sup>45</sup> *DV*, 975, §10. Francis Sullivan has noted that the Latin adjective *authenticum* and the adverb *authentice* as qualifiers of the exercise of magisterium are better translated respectively as “authoritative” and “authoritatively,” rather than as “authentic” and “authentically” (Francis A. Sullivan, SJ, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* [New York: Paulist Press, 1983], 27).

to recognize the indispensable contributions of modern historical understanding to an appreciation of the workings of tradition in the life of the Church. More, the unfinished work of *Dei Verbum*, and perhaps of the Council itself, calls for the Magisterium authentically to teach the ecclesial value of the historical-critical understanding of traditional authority in a manner comparable to its teaching on sacred Scripture, and in that teaching to revise its traditionally ahistorical understanding of authentic teaching.<sup>46</sup>

Since the Council, there have been numerous efforts on the part of Catholic theologians to bring historical-critical awareness to bear on sacred tradition and on the Magisterium's responsibility to interpret tradition authentically. Karl Rahner, for example, has argued that there is no reason to acknowledge "a constitutive material function of tradition that goes beyond the testimony of the nature of scripture" and even that there is a genuinely Catholic understanding of the *sola scriptura* principle.<sup>47</sup> Along the same lines, David Tracy has proposed the formula "Scripture in tradition" as a better conceptualization of relationship than the "older Roman Catholic 'Scripture and tradition'" or "the Reformation's 'Scripture alone.'"<sup>48</sup> These similar proposals reprise the strategy of the conciliar majority—hardly a surprise in the case of Rahner, who had a significant hand in crafting it. This approach implicitly brings tradition under the historically sensitive auspices of Scripture, which here supplies tradition's content. Yet, this explanation remains problematic for

<sup>46</sup> In an essay on the fortieth anniversary of *Dei Verbum*, Ormond Rush makes the passing observation: "Despite its promotion of historical-critical research, the document doesn't really apply such research to its own somewhat idealised and anachronistic image of early church development of tradition and authority structures" (Ormond Rush, "Dei Verbum Forty Years On: Revelation, Inspiration, and the Spirit," *The Australasian Catholic Record* 83 [2006]: 406). Nor, to the point I will develop here, does *Dei Verbum* recognize the role of historical-critical sensibilities in understanding the current exercise of magisterial authority. Rush does address this issue more broadly in his most recent study of the Second Vatican Council. Ormond Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019), 165–87. Several theologians have argued for the need to highlight the hermeneutical importance of *Dei Verbum* in the history of conciliar reception. See, for example, Christoph Theobald, "La Révélation: Quarante ans après *Dei Verbum*," *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 36 (2005): 163; Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 42–43. Cf. Ormond Rush, "Toward a Comprehensive Interpretation of the Council and Its Documents," *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 550.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Rahner, "Scripture and Tradition," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, trans. K.-H. Kruger and B. Kruger (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 107, 108–12.

<sup>48</sup> David Tracy, "On Reading the Scriptures Theologically," in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. B. Marshall (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 37–38.

its reluctance to acknowledge fully the conciliar teaching that tradition does indeed have its own integrity as a mode of divine revelation and, as such, is itself subject to the conditions of historical understanding.

Another theological effort to bring historical-critical awareness to bear on tradition and its magisterial interpretation appears in the work of a host of Catholic theologians who challenge specific teachings of the Magisterium. The first significant example of such challenge in the postconciliar period was the widespread theological critique of Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, "On the Regulation of Birth." Many theologians, most notably the American ethicist Charles Curran, criticized what they judged to be the encyclical's deficient assumptions, faulty argumentation, and inattention to the empirical circumstances of believers' lives that wrongly justified its prohibition of artificial forms of contraception.<sup>49</sup> One might consider the unwillingness of a large number of the Catholic faithful to receive this teaching as a performative call for the Magisterium's greater historical awareness in the exercise of its teaching authority. Another of the many examples of theological challenge is the objection of Catholic feminist theologians to the argumentation enlisted in the 1976 teaching of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, which defended the age-old Catholic practice of restricting priestly ordination to males. Feminist critics of the teaching, which Paul VI ratified, noted the ahistorical character of the document's argument "from origins," that Jesus himself called only males to be his apostles. Even more significantly, feminist theologians rebuffed the document's argument "from representation" that the priest stands in the place of the person of Christ, and so the priest must be a male, as was Christ, to do so. This claim, the critics argued, implicitly contradicts the doctrine of the Council of Chalcedon (451), which taught that the salvation of humanity issued from the incarnational union of Christ's divine nature and his complete human nature, and not at all from the particularity of his maleness. Ironically, they claimed, *Inter Insigniores'* privileging of the maleness of Christ, coupled with its inattention to the broader historicity of traditional teaching, had led to its implicit, unintended, and most unorthodox conclusion that the savior redeemed only males.<sup>50</sup>

Unsurprisingly, these challenges to magisterial authority, which have arisen in rival understandings of what the tradition of the Church should be, have prompted numerous instances of magisterial interventions since

<sup>49</sup> A fine review of the history and the issues by Curran himself is Charles Curran, "Humanae Vitae: Fifty Years Later," *Theological Studies* 79 (2018): 520–42.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 21–59.

the Council to censure the work of Catholic theologians, a fact that stands in tragic contrast to Vatican II as a model of cooperation between bishops and theologians.<sup>51</sup> Whereas magisterial acceptance of the susceptibility of Scripture to historical criticism has enabled Catholic biblical scholarship free rein in the conduct of its craft, the absence of this same acceptance with regard to tradition and its magisterial custody has configured much of the history of postconciliar theology as a continuation of the modernist controversy, albeit in a more moderate key.

One sees something of this postconciliar, antimodernist regard for theology in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1990 teaching *Donum Veritatis*, "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian." While affirming the role of reason in theological reflection, the document portrays proper theological reasoning as utterly deferential to magisterial teaching, even to the point that the theologian's voice rightly echoes the voice of the Magisterium. Should reason lead the theologian to a position different from the teaching of the Magisterium, the theologian has an obligation to refrain from public dissent and "to suffer for the truth, in silence and in prayer."<sup>52</sup> Blaming theological dissent on the Enlightenment "ideology of philosophical liberalism,"<sup>53</sup> *Donum Veritatis* insists that the exercise of magisterium transcends the contributions of critical reasoning whenever such reasoning finds magisterial argumentation questionable:

Certainly, it is one of the theologian's tasks to give a correct interpretation to the texts of the Magisterium and to this end he [or she] employs various hermeneutical rules. Among these is the principle which affirms that Magisterial teaching, by virtue of divine assistance, has a validity beyond its argumentation, which may derive at times from a particular theology.<sup>54</sup>

Quite far from the productive embrace of historical-critical reasoning in the interpretation of the traditional deposit of faith, *Donum Veritatis* teaches that whatever reasonable argumentation the Magisterium enlists in promulgating its teaching finally matters not at all since the charism of the teaching

<sup>51</sup> For a history of postconciliar magisterial interventions, see Bradford E. Hinze, "A Decade of Disciplining Theologians," in *When the Magisterium Intervenes*, ed. R. Gaillardetz (Minneapolis: Liturgical Press, 2012), 18–50.

<sup>52</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Veritatis* (1990), "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19900524\\_theologian-vocation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html), §31.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, §32.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, §34.

office alone justifies its doctrine. Reasoning, even in its theological and magisterial varieties, bears the mark of deficiency whenever it finds itself at odds with magisterial conclusion.

There have been some overtures of rapprochement in this troubled post-conciliar history of measuring theological responsibility to Scripture and tradition, and especially with regard to a historical-critical understanding of the workings of tradition. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1973 declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* punctuated its defense of the Magisterium's infallibility with an acknowledgment of the development of doctrine, if only at the level of dogmatic expression. The declaration acknowledges that "some dogmatic truth [might] first [be] expressed incompletely (but not falsely), and at a later date, when considered in a broader context of faith or human knowledge, it receives a fuller and more perfect expression." The truths of dogmatic formulas "are distinct from the changeable conceptions of a given epoch and can be expressed without them, nevertheless it can sometimes happen that these truths may be enunciated by the Sacred Magisterium in terms that bear traces of such conceptions." Theologians can aid the Magisterium in proposing more adequate expressions of the faith that "maintain and clarify their original meaning."<sup>55</sup> *Mysterium Ecclesiae* thus made some tentative steps toward acknowledging what might be described as a reception model of the development of doctrine, in which the hermeneutical judgments of theologians and the Magisterium might cooperate to achieve a contemporary and relevant communication of ancient truth. Yet, this CDF teaching is far from the recognition that the Catholic belief in the charism of magisterial authority can be reconciled with the evidence of historical criticism.

Any number of Catholic theologians have proposed imagining the cooperation between theologians and the Magisterium as a shared endeavor in the exercise of teaching authority in the Church that entails the work of several *magisteria*, including the magisterium of bishops, of theologians, of the laity, and of the poor.<sup>56</sup> In analogy to the strategy of the episcopal majority in the approval of *Dei Verbum* at Vatican II, this approach insists not on the

<sup>55</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19730705\\_mysterium-ecclesiae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19730705_mysterium-ecclesiae_en.html), §5.

<sup>56</sup> Avery Dulles, "Two Magisteria: An Interim Reflection," in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, ed. L. Salm, 35 (1980): 155–69; Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 252–74; Peter C. Phan, "From Magisterium to Magisteria: Recent Theologies of the Learning and Teaching Functions of the Church," *Theological Studies* 80 (2019): 393–413.

profound unity of Scripture and tradition but on the profound capacity of all in the Church to be teachers in diverse ways through their shared appropriation of the *sensus fidei*. In effect, the argument for multiple *magisteria* attempts to place the episcopal Magisterium within a broader realm of ecclesial experience subject to an ordinary and critical standard of interpretation. This theological proposal has the advantage of reminding all believers of their evangelical responsibility as teachers in the Church. It fails, however, to acknowledge the unique charism of the episcopal Magisterium, to which the *sensus fidei* itself is responsible.<sup>57</sup> The proposal of a diversity of *magisteria* tends to diminish the distinctly Catholic belief in a constitutive tradition, and thus the need for magisterial teaching on tradition to reckon with the implications of modern historical understanding.

Finally, any number of postconciliar theologians have devoted their work to the critical study of the exercise of magisterium<sup>58</sup> or to the formulation of a theory of tradition that would bring critical nuance to *Dei Verbum's* teaching on a constitutive tradition.<sup>59</sup> These critical theologies of the Magisterium and of tradition all wrestle with the same problem: How can one theologically reconcile modern historical understanding, which recognizes the undeniable contingency of time and change, with the Catholic belief in the continuity

<sup>57</sup> "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" (*Lumen Gentium*), in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2: *Trent to Vatican II*, 858, §12.

<sup>58</sup> There are many examples. Some are: Karl Rahner, "The Teaching Office of the Church in the Present-Day Crisis of Authority," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 12, trans. D. Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 3–30; Max Seckler, "Kirchliches Lehramt und theologische Wissenschaft: Geschichtliche Aspekte, Probleme und Lösungselemente," in *Die Theologie und das Lehramt*, ed. W. Kern (Freiburg: Herder, 1982), 17–62; Francis A. Sullivan, SJ, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church; Creative Fidelity: Weighing and Interpreting Documents of the Magisterium* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996); John E. Thiel, *Imagination and Authority: Theological Authorship in the Modern Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); *By What Authority?: Foundations for Understanding Authority in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018).

<sup>59</sup> Some examples include John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith*; John E. Thiel, "The Analogy of Tradition: Method and Theological Judgment," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 358–80; Terrence Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003); Siegfried Wiedenhofer, "Tradition-Geschichte-Gedächtnis: Was Bringt eine komplexe Traditionstheorie?" *Erwägen, Wissen, Ethik* 15 (2004): 229–38; Orlando O. Espín and Gary Macy, eds., *Futuring Our Past: Explorations in the Theology of Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006); Joseph G. Mueller, SJ, "Forgetting as a Principle of Continuity in Tradition," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 751–81.



of the apostolic tradition, which the Magisterium has the duty to safeguard? *Dei Verbum* did not address this question. As we have seen, the conciliar debate on divine revelation moved in directions shaped by other concerns.<sup>60</sup> Guided by papal precedent, the Council Fathers taught that the historical-critical method posed no threat to the divine inspiration of sacred Scripture. Making a parallel claim about the charism of the teaching office never entered the Council's consciousness, even though its rejection of the "two sources" conceptualization confirmed its teaching that the truth of the divine Word is singular. The postconciliar history of the reception of *Dei Verbum* has found theologians attempting to answer this unaddressed question, directly or performatively, and the Magisterium fearing that even posing the question is a relativistic betrayal of theological faithfulness and an assault on hierarchical authority.

Until the Magisterium addresses and definitively answers this question, the bishops and a conservative minority of theologians will continue to perceive much of modern Catholic theology through antimodernist eyes and many Catholic theologians will judge much of the exercise of magisterium as a Catholic version of fundamentalism.<sup>61</sup> *Dei Verbum's* clear teaching on the legitimate role of historical criticism in the interpretation of Scripture provides the proper precedent for addressing the role of historical criticism in the interpretation of tradition: for "tradition and scripture together form a single sacred deposit of the word of God" and the "teaching function [of the Magisterium] is not above the word of God but stands at its service."<sup>62</sup> A more flourishing and creative exercise of magisterial authority lies in the reconciliation of inspiration and historical understanding in both Scripture and tradition.

<sup>60</sup> In his commentary on *Dei Verbum*, Joseph Ratzinger expresses regret that the Council Fathers did not heed the call of the American Cardinal Albert Meyer in the debate on divine revelation. In a speech delivered on September 30, 1964, Meyer argued for an emendation to the text that stated that "not everything that exists in the Church must for that reason also be a legitimate tradition," even to the point that the Cardinal distinguished between "distorting" and "legitimate" ecclesial traditions (Joseph Ratzinger, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. H. Vorgrimler, trans. W. Glen-Doepel, et al., vol. 3 [New York: Herder and Herder, 1969], 185). Acknowledging such a distinction in *Dei Verbum* might have opened the door as well to recognizing the appropriate role of historical criticism in making such judgments.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Gaillardetz has made the insightful observation that at the heart of this failure to reconcile magisterial authority with historical criticism lies a defective theology of the assistance of the Holy Spirit to the Magisterium. See Gaillardetz, *By What Authority?: Foundations for Understanding Authority in the Church*, 122–24.

<sup>62</sup> *DV*, 975, §10.