

Gorg Preca's Use of the Bible Prior to Vatican Council II

St George Preca or Dun Ġorg Preca¹ (1880-1962), as he is locally known, was a Maltese priest whose ministry before the Second Vatican Council seems to have foreseen what Vatican Council II was to promulgate regarding the use of the Bible in pastoral ministry in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* (DV).² Ġorg Preca attributed a lot of importance to the Bible as the Word of God, both in his ministry as an ordained priest, and in the writings which he specifically compiled as books and notes for catechists who were members of the Society of Christian Doctrine which he founded. In this article, after giving a brief biography of his life and commitments, I intend to demonstrate how, and to what extent, St George Preca was a precursor of Vatican Council II with regards to the biblical pastoral ministry. Since it would be extremely difficult to understand the importance which Ġorg Preca gave to the Bible, I shall first be considering the context and milieu in which he lived.

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¹ *Dun* is the Maltese equivalent for "Reverend." It is used with reference to a priest.

² "Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II: Constitutio Dogmatica de Divina Revelatione," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966): 817-835. One may also consult the official online translation in English at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

Dun Ġorġ Preca and M.U.S.E.U.M.³

Ġorġ Preca was the seventh son of Vincenz Preca and Natalina Ceravolo. His father was a health inspector, while his mother was a teacher.⁴ Preca's parents were good Christians who educated and encouraged their children to grow up as true Christians. Ġorġ was born in Valletta on the 12 February 1880. We have very little information about Ġorġ Preca's childhood except those facts which he narrated to others when he grew up.⁵ When Ġorġ Preca was an altar-boy he experienced what the teaching of the catechism meant, because in those days, those who had received the sacrament of confirmation and were altar-boys, became catechists under the supervision of the sexton.⁶ When Ġorġ was seventeen years old he met Fr Ercole Mompalao, one of his teachers. While they were walking and exchanging ideas, Mompalao stopped, looked at Ġorġ and told him that in adulthood he would socialize with a group of people who love God, and they would be of mutual help to each other.⁷

When Ġorġ Preca finished his studies at the Lyceum, he proceeded to the Seminary. During the year 1906 when Preca was already a deacon, he had to undergo a very severe trial because of ill-health. However, he was able to recover his health and on the 22 December 1906 he was ordained a priest by Archbishop Pietro Pace.⁸ Ġorġ Preca had always been stunned by the religious ignorance of those lay faithful who taught catechism to children. While he appreciated the work which they were doing, he was concerned with some erroneous explanations which he had heard during catechism classes. One of these occurred when a child enquired about who created God, and the catechist replied that God had created

³ For more details on Preca's biography, see Alexander Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca (1880-1962): Hajja-xhieda-dokumenti*, 3 vols. (Blata-Bajda: Soċjeta Duttrina Nisranija M.U.S.E.U.M., 1980-89); Angelo Montonati, *Coraggio e profezia: Un pioniere del Vaticano II; Il beato Giorgio Preca (Malta 1880-1962)* (Cinisello Balsamo, MI: Edizioni San Paolo, 2003); Alexander Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca (1880-1962): Apostle for the Spreading of the Word of God and Founder of the Society of Christian Doctrine* (Malta: The Society [of] Christian Doctrine, 1985). For more concise versions see Roberto Darmanin, "La Società della Dottrina Cristiana e il suo fondatore, Don Giorgio Preca," *Civiltà Cattolica* 141, no. 2 (1990): 256-260; Lorenzo Gatt, "Don Giorgio Preca: pioniere dell'apostolato dei laici," *Rogate Ergo* 50, no. 2 (1987): 45-47; Gatt, "Don Giorgio Preca: generoso apostolo della Chiesa Maltese," *L'Osservatore Romano*, March 6, 1987: 4; Nazzareno Camilleri, "Il servo di Dio Mons. Giorgio Preca apostolo delle isole di Malta e Gozo," *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 31 - August 1, 1972: 2.

⁴ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:65,75-76.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:76-80; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 20.

⁶ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:92; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 21.

⁷ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:102; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 22.

⁸ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:107-108,122,129-131; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 22, 24.

himself!⁹ Preca could not accept such statements and started pondering about how he could rectify all this in an organized way.

The first meetings which Ġorġ Preca had with a group of young men from the town of Hamrun - with whom he would later to found an organization for the teaching Christian doctrine - date back to the time when he was still a seminarian. His first encounters with this group took place in an unused field in front of the Hamrun parish church, where every evening a group of young men used to congregate to chat and smoke. Ġorġ Preca first approached them under the pretence of sharing a cigarette with them. When he got to know them, he used to tell them stories from which he would extract some moral, or speak to them about God.¹⁰ It was from these meetings that Ġorġ Preca started articulating his endeavour. On being ordained priest, Preca gave up his contacts with this group because during that period Ġorġ Preca was spending a lot of time in personal prayer and reflection to enable him to discern what God wanted from him.¹¹ It was during this period that Dun Ġorġ meditated deeply on a biblical text taken from the Second Letter to Timothy: "Pass on to reliable people what you have heard from me through many witnesses so that they in turn will be able to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2).

When Preca went to confession after his long retreat, around the end of January 1907, he confided with his confessor that he was thinking about organizing the group of young men whom he had been meeting at Hamrun into an association for the teaching of catechism. The confessor advised Preca that the latter was to put into practice whatever he was inspired to do, and identifies the means to sustain such an endeavour. Dun Ġorġ also spoke to the parish priest of Hamrun who proved to be not only in favour of the initiative but also instructed Preca to start immediately, telling him that if any formalities were required by the Church authorities, these were to be catered for later on.¹²

Ġorġ Preca thought it unwise to continue meeting the group of young men in the field in front of the Hamrun parish church. He therefore summoned a meeting at the near by chapel of *Ta' Nuzzu* on the 2 February 1907. But in order to avoid the inconvenience of meeting in a venue belonging to others, the group started to look out for a place where they could meet by themselves. They soon found a house at Hamrun, precisely at no. 6 Fra Diegu Street. The first official meeting of the nascent association was held there on Thursday 7 March 1907.¹³

⁹ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:151; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 26-27.

¹⁰ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:123-124; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 25.

¹¹ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:136, 154.

¹² Ibid., 1:154-155; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 28-29.

¹³ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:155-158; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 31.

In identifying a name for the new association, Preca did not want to impose himself without sounding out the young men themselves. When he asked them to suggest a name for the association, one of them answered that they should call it a *mużew* (literally: a museum) because precious objects were stored in such institutions. Preca changed the word into its Latin equivalent: M.U.S.E.U.M. and gave it a more profound meaning, through the reformation of an acronym: *Magister, utinam sequatur Evangelium universus mundus*. The official name which Preca wished to give the Society was *Socjetà tal-Papidi u Papidissi*, that is, Society of the Sons and Daughters of the Pope. Preca himself insisted that he used the words *papidi* and *papidissi* to keep the Society away from any suspicions of heresy and doctrinal errors.¹⁴

Ġorġ Preca was slowly organizing his young men into a group that would be able to dedicate itself totally to the service of the Church, through the teaching of the catechism. Initially he allowed everyone to join this group, but one day he told them that he had taken a very important decision: from that day onwards only the unmarried could form part of the Society.¹⁵

Ġorġ Preca organized the Society which he founded by establishing offices with particular responsibilities. These offices included those of the Superior General with responsibility over a particular section of the Society; the various Superiors with responsibility over the different centres; the Priest Inspectors who were to ascertain that the teaching given by the Society was orthodox; the Twelve Auxiliaries, each of whom held responsibility for a particular activity within the Society; the Major Theologian, a member who excelled in the knowledge of Christian doctrine; and the Minor Theologians, responsible for different branches of theology. There were also the *parrini* (godfathers) who acted as spiritual directors. This help and direction was imparted by a senior member of the Society to other members on a spiritual level and in adherence to the rule of the Society.¹⁶

When Preca founded the male section of M.U.S.E.U.M. he was surely also thinking of establishing a parallel female section. He found a way in which to put this idea into practice at the beginning of 1910, through a certain Ġiannina Cutajar, the daughter of a wine merchant from Paola. The foundation day of the female section of M.U.S.E.U.M. occurred on the 10 January 1910. Preca insisted

¹⁴ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:170-172; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 35-36.

¹⁵ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:171,181; *ibid.*, 2:208; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 32.

¹⁶ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:318; *ibid.*, 2: 37-39, 67-71, 83-84, 88-104, 159, 167, 170-175, 185-188.

that there was to be no communication whatsoever between the male and the female sections of the Society, in order to avoid any temptations and scandals.¹⁷

The Society founded by Ġorġ Preca underwent its periods of trial which could be clearly identified with the years 1909 and 1916. In 1916, the Church authorities in Malta probed into the M.U.S.E.U.M. organization, and the content and method of its catechism classes through an intensive official inquiry. As a result of this inquiry, Ġorġ Preca was asked to submit a set of the Society regulations, though this only took place thirteen years later.¹⁸

The last three years of Dun Ġorġ Preca's life were characterized by serious health problems which eventually led to his death on the 26 July 1962.¹⁹

Ġorġ Preca: A Prolific Writer

Ġorġ Preca was a prolific writer.²⁰ He published his first writings during the early years of the existence of the Society in the first decades of the twentieth century.²¹ In analysing his works, one notes that they abound with references and direct quotations from the Bible, which he himself translated from the Vulgate into Maltese. Preca did this at a time when the Bible at hands of lay persons was a rarity. In fact, we can say that the Bible was then the exclusive reserved to clerics.

The different works written by Preca affirm that he wanted to establish all his apostolic activity on the Word of God. The different models and methods on the use of the Bible in his works - amongst which we find didactic uses of the Bible, meditations, parenetic works, typologies, use of the Bible for different catechetical methods, and different genres of writing based on those found in the Bible - all show that he not only wanted to assign the Bible with a prominent role in the Society, but wanted it to enjoy *the central* position.²² Moreover, through his

¹⁷ Ibid., 1:224-227, 243-244; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 76.

¹⁸ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:206, 349; *ibid.*, 3:240-241.

¹⁹ Ibid., 3:463-476; Montonati, *Coraggio*, 95-96.

²⁰ The *Positio* which brings together the documents and the articles which were used for his beatification and canonisation lists 143 works. See "Elenco dei libri scritti da don Giorgio Preca," in *Meliten.: Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Georgii Preca Sacerdotis et Fundatoris Societatis Doctrinae Christianae (M.U.S.E.U.M) (1880-1962): Positio super Vita, Virtutibus e Fama Sanctitatis*, ed. Congregatio de Causis Sanctorum (Rome: Tipografia Guerra, 1997), 503-520. Natalino Camilleri, "Metaphors of Christian Life in the Writings of Dun Ġorġ" (M.A. Theology diss., University of Malta, 1997), 95-117 gives the most up-to-date elenchus of the writings of Ġorġ Preca. He states that the bibliography of Ġorġ Preca is made up of 119 books and pamphlets, 145 leaflets and handbills, 131 articles published in periodicals or newspapers, and 15 unpublished works.

²¹ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca. Hajja*, 3:293.

²² Carl-Mario Sultana, "The Presence and the Use of the Bible in the Ministry and in the Works

endeavours Ġorġ Preca clearly showed that all the proclamation of the Society of Christian Doctrine, revolves and finds its unique source and its sustenance in the Word of God as found in the Bible.²³

Ahead of His Time in the Use of the Bible

After having taken a bird's eye view of Ġorġ Preca's life, I would like to demonstrate how through his endeavours, Preca was a pioneer of Vatican Council II. I will be doing this by referring to his ministry and his work as a priest and a catechist, in the light of what the Second Vatican Council was to promulgate in *Dei Verbum* after his death.

The very first words of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* clearly define its aim: helping the faithful to listen to the Word of God as found in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, and to forward it to others by faithfully proclaiming it.²⁴ This is one of the objectives which Preca had at heart. All his endeavours centred on, and revolved around this particular mission, which he strove to accomplish through his indefatigable endeavours in the foundation of the Society of Christian Doctrine and also through his numerous writings. In this respect, Dun Ġorġ can make his, the words with which St John introduces his First Letter: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - the life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us - we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 1:1-3).

It is not my aim of this article to go through the entire Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* and analyse its contents. This article will limit itself to the final chapter of *Dei Verbum*, highlighting the pertinent changes which this document brought about regarding the use of the Bible in the Church. We can then clearly see how, through his endeavours Dun Ġorġ was a precursor and a pioneer of these changes in Malta. Notwithstanding this, a bird's eye view of *Dei Verbum* can help us to understand better the theme under study.

of Dun Ġorġ Preca" (S.Th.D. diss., Università Pontificia Salesiana, 2007); Sultana, "Catechesis in Europe during the Twentieth Century," in *Sophia-paideia: Sapienza e educazione* (Sir 1,27): *Miscellanea di studi offerti in onore del prof. Don Mario Cimosà*, ed. Gillian Bonney and Rafael Vicent (Roma: LAS, 2012), 423-450.

²³ "Dun Ġorġ: Fundatur tal-teologi bil-boilersuits," *L-Orizzont*, Lulju 27, 1987: 9.

²⁴ *Dei Verbum* (DV), no.1.

The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* was promulgated on 18 November 1965 by Pope Paul VI. The theme which runs transversally throughout *Dei Verbum* is divine revelation in Sacred Scripture. The Constitution is divided into six chapters with the first chapter being dedicated to the theological concepts of revelation and knowledge of God.²⁵ Chapter 2 focuses on the transmission of revelation.²⁶ This paves the way to what is central in *Dei Verbum*: revelation through Sacred Scripture. Chapter 3 is the fulcrum of this Dogmatic Constitution because it speaks of biblical inspiration. Moreover, it demonstrates how Sacred Scripture is to be interpreted in the light of the fact that the texts are inspired by the Holy Spirit.²⁷ Chapters 4 and 5 then delve separately into God's revelation as found in the Old and the New Testament respectively.²⁸ Chapter 6 deals with Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church.²⁹

Chapter 6 can be considered “a spiritual and practical text in which consequences are drawn for the life of the Church from the other more doctrinal chapters.”³⁰ It is not a simple addendum to render the text more practical.³¹ It aims at drawing practical conclusions regarding the use of the Bible in the Church, after having conducted a detailed study of the theology of divine revelation.³² *Dei Verbum* urges the Church to consider Sacred Scripture as the rule of faith, as the foundation of all the preaching and the proclamation of the Church, and as the food and nourishment of the faithful.³³ For this to be achieved, *Dei Verbum* states that the faithful must have amply access to the Word of God through different means or channels, especially through biblical translations into the vernacular.³⁴ These translations can be even more endowed through readings of the works of the Fathers of the Church, through explanations of the Word

²⁵ Ibid., nos.2-6.

²⁶ Ibid., nos.7-10.

²⁷ Ibid., nos.11-13.

²⁸ Ibid., nos.14-16, 17-20.

²⁹ Ibid., nos.21-26.

³⁰ Roger Schutz and Max Thurian, *Revelation: A Protestant View: The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation; A Commentary* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1968), 68.

³¹ Walter Kasper, “Dei Verbum Audiens et Proclamans: The Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum,” *Bulletin Dei Verbum* 76/77, no. 3-4 (2005): 19.

³² Carlo Maria Martini, “La Sacra Scrittura nella vita della Chiesa,” in *La costituzione dogmatica sulla divina rivelazione: Storia; Testo latino dello schema preconiliare “De Fontibus Revelationis”; Prospetto sinottico delle quattro principali redazioni dello schema “De Divina Revelatione”; Traduzione italiana del testo promulgato; Esposizione e commento*, 3rd ed. (Leumann, TO: Elle Di Ci, [1967]), 417.

³³ *DV*, no.21.

³⁴ Ibid., no.22.

of God by biblical scholars, and through adequate notes to help the readers to understand the Word of God.³⁵ All this provides invaluable help to preachers and catechists in their ministry of explaining the Word of God in a clear and illuminating manner, and helping the faithful to live the Word of God.³⁶

The last chapter of *Dei Verbum* also emphasizes that both the priests and the laity should be intimately familiar with the Word of God.³⁷ Ultimately *Dei Verbum* hopes that this return to the study and knowledge of Sacred Scripture would bring about a revival in the spiritual life of the faithful.³⁸

Dei Verbum paved the way from a defensive attitude with regards to the Bible to a more positive stance, by encouraging the reading, meditation, and study of the Word of God even by the laity.³⁹ This also brought about moments of friction and points of resistance. “The resistance encountered should not surprise us too much. On the doctrinal level, this Constitution, together with the Constitution on the Church, is the most important document of the Council by reason of the seriousness of the problems taken up....”⁴⁰

The Word of God as the Basis of all Proclamation

Dei Verbum no.21 declares that the Word of God is the nourishment of the Church. The Church’s preaching mission, and indeed the entire Christian religion should be nourished and guided by the Word of God as it is found in Sacred Scripture because the Word of God guides, directs, governs and rules faith and its proclamation.⁴¹ The reason which *Dei Verbum* gives for placing the Word of God as the source and foundation of all preaching, and of the entire Christian faith, is that:

Scripture consigned in writing once and for all has a uniquely unchanging character. It is therefore the supreme and immutable rule of the faith of the Church; its inspiration and its immutability are a solid rock on which the Church rests. Furthermore, the text specifies that because of its inspiration and immutability Scripture communicates immutably the very Word of God.⁴²

³⁵ Ibid., nos.23,25.

³⁶ Ibid., no.24; Martini, “La Sacra Scrittura nella vita,” 418-419.

³⁷ *DV*, no. 25.

³⁸ Ibid., no.26; Martini, “La Sacra Scrittura nella vita,” 418-419.

³⁹ Martini, “La Sacra Scrittura nella vita,” 421.

⁴⁰ Rene Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation: Including a Commentary on the Constitution “Dei Verbum” of Vatican II* (New York: Alba House, 1966), 484.

⁴¹ *DV*, no. 21.

⁴² Schutz and Thurian, *Revelation*, 72.

Ġorġ Preca's ministry and works attest to the fact that he applied the Word of God in Sacred Scripture as the basis of all his earthly endeavours and pastoral ministry.⁴³ We have already mentioned how Preca was inspired by the Word of God itself to establish the Society of Christian Doctrine.

Biblical Ministry and Biblical Apostolate

There are two ways in which the Bible can be used in the Church:

1. The biblical ministry;
2. The biblical apostolate.

The difference between these two ways of using the Bible in the ministry of the Church is neither subtle nor indifferent.

Biblical ministry refers to the use of the Bible in different pastoral and ecclesial ministries: in the proclamation of the Word of God, within the catechetical ministry, in the liturgical sphere, and in the rendering of charitable services. In all these different ministries which imply different types of activities, the Bible is not encountered for its own sake, but it is encountered as a stepping stone and as a service to the particular ministry. Nonetheless, it is still the foundation of all the different activities within that particular ministry.⁴⁴ For example, biblical texts are usually referred to during the process of catechesis. These texts are used to explain some particular experience drawn from human life or some other pertinent teaching.⁴⁵

On the other hand, in the *biblical apostolate* the Bible is encountered for its own sake, for itself and in itself in a direct way. The biblical apostolate is aimed at helping the individual to get in touch with the biblical text directly, know what it contains, and make it a source of one's Christian life.⁴⁶ In this sense, the biblical text is considered and welcomed as a direct encounter with God who speaks through his word to the individual and

⁴³ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:122-163; *ibid.*, 3:285-371.

⁴⁴ Cesare Bissoli summarises the biblical ministry with respect to catechesis using the following terms: "Mira a conoscere la verità cristiana alla fonte della Bibbia ...; L'incontro sviluppa la componente biblica nell'itinerario catechistico...; L'incontro è integrato con altre componenti (teologica, liturgica, morale, storica, esperienziale...)" see Cesare Bissoli, "*Va' e annuncia*" (*Mc 5:19*): *Manuale di catechesi biblica* (Leumann, TO: Elledici, 2006), 255.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁶ Cesare Bissoli encapsulates the biblical apostolate in the following statements: "Mira ad iniziare alla Bibbia come fonte della catechesi ...; L'incontro è autonomo, riguarda la Bibbia in se stessa (ad es. nello studio della Genesi, dei Vangeli, di Paolo) ...; L'incontro vale per se stesso ... ma si integra con la catechesi dei catechismi," *ibid.*, 255.

to the community directly, here and now, in the particular situation in which one is living.⁴⁷

These two forms of ministry are alluded to in *Dei Verbum* no.24 which attributes a privileged position to the Word of God in preaching, in catechesis, and in the liturgy.⁴⁸ *Dei Verbum* mentions preaching, catechesis, and the homily within the liturgy as different forms of pastoral ministry in which the Bible is used.⁴⁹ These forms of ministry form part of what is referred to as the biblical ministry:

The word of Scripture should in the same way be made to nourish and strengthen the ministry of the Word: preaching, catechism, the whole work of Christian formation in which the liturgical homily is meant to play an important role. It is in Scripture that the ministry of the Word finds nourishment and health, strength and holiness (*salubriter nutritur sancteque virescit*).⁵⁰

Preaching consists of an orderly way of evangelizing and presenting the Christian faith in order to illuminate the mind and move the will of the faithful to live a more Christian life in our contemporary social situation. Preaching usually commences from a biblical pericope and always refers to the doctrinal and moral teaching which can be extracted from a particular biblical text.⁵¹ Catechesis encapsulates the systematic instruction aimed at educating a person in faith. Catechesis is organized for different categories of people who belong either to different age groups or to different social situations. Catechesis expounds upon the plan and the history of salvation in a chronological and orderly way, such that it demonstrates how the truths proclaimed and professed by the Church are rooted in the history of salvation.⁵² The homily in sacred liturgy consists mainly of an explanation of those biblical texts which had been read during the Liturgy of the Word.⁵³ The homily is always founded on a biblical text which is explained and applied to the concrete and actual contemporary situation of the congregation.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Ibid., 266.

⁴⁸ *DV*, no. 24.

⁴⁹ Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nella vita," 452.

⁵⁰ Schutz and Thurian, *Revelation*, 77.

⁵¹ Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nella vita," 452-453.

⁵² Ibid., 452-453.

⁵³ The Dogmatic Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* nos. 51-52 gives a clear and good description of what the homily is, what the scope of the homily should be, and how this scope is achieved, see *Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II*, "Constitutio de Sacra Liturgia," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 56 (1964): 51-52. The online translation in English is found at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

⁵⁴ Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nella vita," 452-453.

Dun Ġorġ Preca was able to touch upon all of these forms of biblical ministry during his life. With regards to preaching, besides his normal preaching as a priest and as a catechist, some of Preca's writings actually take the form of preaching, in that he elaborates upon a particular theme in detail, aided by the Word of God in the Bible, in such a way that he makes a systematic study of that particular theme. The difference is that these "preachings" are written down, and not based only on the spoken word. Preca also has some writings which seek to narrate how God planned everything in the history of salvation, and that whatever we believe in through Christian faith can be proven and arrived at through historical events. These events demonstrate God's love for mankind and His preordained plan of salvation. *Dei Verbum* speaks directly and clearly about the *biblical apostolate*, when in no. 25, it calls all the faithful, be they ordained ministers or lay faithful, to dedicate some of their time to reading and getting acquainted with Sacred Scripture.⁵⁵ While ordained ministers have the duty of preaching the infinite riches that are found in the Bible, the religious and the lay faithful are exhorted to read the Bible in order to get to know Christ in a more prolific way:⁵⁶

All the ministers of the Church are called to devote themselves to Scripture by careful reading and deep study so that they may listen to the Word of God before preaching and communicating all its infinite riches to the faithful... The Council insistently exhorts all Christians and all religious to read Scripture frequently so that they may learn to know Jesus Christ.⁵⁷

The continuous study of Sacred Scripture which *Dei Verbum* exhorts everyone to accomplish includes the reading the sacred text according to the tradition of the Fathers of the Church. The Fathers of the Church did not just read the mere words of Sacred Scripture and understand the words within the texts which they

⁵⁵ *DV*, no. 25.

⁵⁶ The exhortation made by *DV* to religious and lay people is also found in other documents of the Second Vatican Council. The Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* no. 6 asserts that those who have professed the evangelical counsels should always have the Bible in hand in order to learn more about Christ, and to imitate him better, see "Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II: Decretum de Accomodata Renovazione Vitae Religiosae," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966): 6. An online English translation can be found at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html. The Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* emphasizes that one of the sources of lay spirituality is the meditation of the Word of God, see "Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II: Decretum de Apostolatu Laicorum," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966): 4. An online translation in English can be found at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html.

⁵⁷ Schutz and Thurian, *Revelation*, 78.

read, but they meditated upon these texts, applying them to their daily life. In *Dei Verbum* the recommended careful study of the texts implies not just a mere arid reading of the Bible but an intense study of the Bible through daily meditation, which ultimately leads to the application of the Word of God in daily life.

What is meant [by meditation] is obviously a spiritual and meditative experience that is not strictly exegetical. The idea is to approach the text with a simple explanation, one that captures its fundamental meanings and permanent message and that can challenge the one who reads and meditates and move him to pray on the basis of the text he has before him.⁵⁸

The written works of Ġorġ Preca demonstrate that even in this respect, he was a precursor of *Dei Verbum* and of Vatican Council II. Among the repertoire of Preca's writings, we find a considerable number of works written specifically in the form of meditations. Examples of such works include: *Il-ktieb il-kbir*,⁵⁹ *Qaġhdiet musewmini*,⁶⁰ *Il-ktieb tan-notturri*,⁶¹ *Lucerna tal-Ispirtu Santu*,⁶² *Il-mansjonijiet*,⁶³ and *Pasklu fuq ix-xenovlepija ta' San Ġużeppi*.⁶⁴ In these works of a meditative nature, Preca wanted the members of the Society of Christian Doctrine, and indeed all the lay faithful, to meditate upon the Word of God in order to be able to apply it more easily to their daily lives. Some of his meditations also carry resolutions at the end of each meditation.⁶⁵ These invite the reader to practice some particular virtue or good quality in one's daily life as a result of the meditation. *Dei Verbum* no. 25 also expresses the wish that the reading of Sacred Scripture should be accompanied by prayer so that there may evolve a true dialogue between God and the listening human being.⁶⁶ In this way, a dialogue is established between God and the human being. God speaks to the human being

⁵⁸ Carlo Maria Martini, "The Central Role of the Word of God in the Life of the Church: Biblical Animation of the Entire Pastoral Ministry," *Bulletin Dei Verbum* 76/77, no. 3-4 (2005): 37.

⁵⁹ Ġorġ Preca, *Il-ktieb il-kbir* ([Blata l-Bajda]: Societas Doctrinae Christianae M.U.S.E.U.M., 1983).

⁶⁰ Preca, *Qaġhdiet musewmini* ([Valletta: Chretien & Co., 1920?]).

⁶¹ Preca, *Il-ktieb tan-notturri* ([Blata l-Bajda], Societas Doctrinae Christianae M.U.S.E.U.M., 1992).

⁶² Preca, *Lucerna ta l-Ispirtu s-Santu* ([Valletta: Chretien & Co., 1920?]).

⁶³ Preca, "Il-mansjonijiet," in *Il-mansjonijiet u praeconia* ([Blata l-Bajda]: Societas Doctrinae Christianae M.U.S.E.U.M., 1990), 5-46.

⁶⁴ Preca, "Pasklu fuq ix-xenovlepija ta' San Ġużeppi," in *San Ġużeppi* ([Blata l-Bajda]: Societas Doctrinae Christianae M.U.S.E.U.M., 1997), 37-40.

⁶⁵ Preca, *Il-ktieb il-kbir*.

⁶⁶ Schutz and Thurian, *Revelation*, 78.

through his word, and the human being responds by accepting God's word and asking for the grace to live according to it.⁶⁷

The meditative works of Dun Ġorġ demonstrate that he wanted prayer to be an integral part of some of his writings.⁶⁸ Consequently, besides the fact that meditation is in itself already a prayer, in some instances Preca also added prayers before and after the meditations themselves. However, one can also consider the prayers and the para-liturgical celebrations which he wrote and which were inspired by the Word of God.

When one considers all the above-mentioned aspects which emerge both in a general and in a specific way in the ministry and in the works of Preca, one cannot negate that Preca foresaw and put into practice, what *Dei Verbum* would eventually state on the Word of God with regards to the biblical ministry and the biblical apostolate. Ġorġ Preca was thus a forerunner of *Dei Verbum*, decades before it was promulgated.

The Bible: A Book Explained for all the Faithful

The opening words of *Dei Verbum* no. 22, exhorting the accessibility of Sacred Scripture as much as possible to the faithful, are a corollary to what the same Dogmatic Constitution states in the previous paragraph about the Word of God as the foundation of all the proclamation of the Christian faith.⁶⁹ This is one of the major reforms posited by *Dei Verbum*, because historically the Church had not always allow the faithful to have a direct access to Sacred Scripture.⁷⁰ Before Vatican Council II, there was a great detachment between the Bible and the faithful. However, one must state that this detachment was not always so pronounced, because during the patristic period and through a large part of the Middle Ages, the Bible as the Word of God formed an intrinsic part of the life of the Church, and was a fundamental text for the formation of the laity. During these period there were in fact no catechisms, nor theological treatises.⁷¹

⁶⁷ MARTINI, "La Sacra Scrittura nella vita," 459.

⁶⁸ Preca, *Il-ktieb tan-notturmi*; Preca, *Lucerna ta l-Ispirtu s-Santu*; "Pasklu fuq ix-xenovlepija ta' San Ġużepp."

⁶⁹ DV, no. 22; Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nella vita," 434.

⁷⁰ Luis Alonso Schökel, "Considerazioni sulla *Dei Verbum* a trenta anni dal Concilio," *Firmana: Quaderni di teologia e pastorale* 11 (1996): 21.

⁷¹ Carlo Maria Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nutrimento e regola della predicazione e della religione: (Cap. VI della *Dei Verbum*," in *La Bibbia nella Chiesa dopo la "Dei Verbum": Studi sulla costituzione conciliare*, eds. S. Lyonnet et al. (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 1969), 162-169; Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nella vita," 437. Cesare Bissoli gives a very good overview of the way in which the Bible was treated in different epochs of Christianity. With reference to the relation of the

The situation changed towards the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) due to the emergence of heresies. The Church considered that the sources of these heresies as originating from vernacular translations of the Bible.⁷² More specifically, the Protestant Reformation led the Church authorities to take a defensive attitude with regards to the Bible translations, prohibiting any translation into the vernacular, and thus discouraging the private reading or use of the Bible by the laity. As a result the laity had a very restricted access to the Bible. This shows that between the seventeenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, there had been very little contact with the Bible.⁷³ Notwithstanding the fact that the faithful were discouraged from reading the Bible privately, the Bible was not however totally segregated from the people. A very limited contact with the Bible was retained through public catechetical sessions. The Bible was also explained during homilies. Moreover, the Council of Trent had allowed for the possibility of public reading of approved biblical commentaries. Furthermore, a substantial amount of Bibles and of translations of the Bible still remained in circulation. However, the measures taken both on a local and universal level were aimed at drastically limiting the private use of Sacred Scripture.⁷⁴

Due to the way in which the situation developed after the Protestant Reformation, ordained ministers were not stimulated to acquire a profound knowledge of the Word of God. The laity were neither encouraged nor exhorted to read the Bible, or to acquire a minimum knowledge of what it contained.⁷⁵ *Dei Verbum* changed all this and, once again, made the Bible accessible to the faithful. In fact, one can say that the main preoccupation of the Second Vatican Council was to give Sacred Scripture back to the faithful, who in their turn would accept the Bible as the Word of God.⁷⁶ This brought about a change in the way in which the Bible was looked upon both by the Church and by the faithful themselves. "The fences that had been erected with respect to the vernacular Bible and to Bible reading by non-theologians ever since the 13th century and especially the 15th century are here decisively torn down."⁷⁷ However, one must also say that the change brought about by *Dei Verbum*

Bible to catechesis during the Patristic period and during the Middle Ages, see Bissoli, "*Va' e annuncia*," 31-37.

⁷² Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nutrimento," 162-169.

⁷³ Carlo Maria Martini, "Alcuni aspetti della costituzione dogmatica *Dei Verbum*," *La Civiltà Cattolica* 117, no. 2 (1966): 224; Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nella vita," 435; Alonso Schökel, "Considerazioni sulla *Dei Verbum*," 22.

⁷⁴ Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nella vita," 435; Martini, "Alcuni aspetti," 226.

⁷⁵ Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nutrimento," 166-169.

⁷⁶ Martini, "Alcuni aspetti," 226.

⁷⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, "The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: A Commentary,"

was not that of breaking new ground but a return to the roots of the tradition of the Church with regards to the Bible, and to the original role of the Bible within the Church.⁷⁸ *Dei Verbum* therefore marks the end of a period in which the Word of God was jealously defended. From that point onwards, the reading of Sacred Scripture by all the faithful was considered as the most important thing.⁷⁹

Ġorġ Preca anticipated this situation not only by making the Bible the centre of all his activity, but also by making it accessible to the lay members of the Society of Christian Doctrine which he had founded. He did this at a time when no church-approved biblical translation was available in Maltese. Consequently, he himself translated parts of the Bible from the Vulgate which was the official version available in those times.⁸⁰ Ġorġ Preca founded the Society of Christian Doctrine at a time when it was not only unacceptable to have bibles in the hands of the lay faithful, but also when the laity themselves were rather hesitant in reading the holy text, because they had been brought up with the perception that they were not even worthy of touching it.⁸¹

Ġorġ Preca's initiative was neither easy nor simple, because of the restrictions on the use of the Bible by the lay faithful prevalent in those times.⁸² Many, in fact, misunderstood Dun Ġorġ Preca and considered him as going beyond the limits in this respect. He underwent times of trial in 1909 through articles which appeared in local newspapers. Later, he was even reported to the bishop for taking the initiative of founding the Society of Christian Doctrine based on laity who take the study of the Word of God very seriously. The bishop ordered an inquiry to examine how the Society functioned.⁸³ Ultimately, history was to prove that Preca was on the right track, and the Society was canonically approved in 1932.⁸⁴ The reason why Ġorġ Preca made the Bible accessible to the members of the Society was because he wanted the Word of God to act as

Bulletin Dei Verbum 74/75, nos. 1-2 (2005): 4.

⁷⁸ Alonso Schökel, "Considerazioni sulla *DV*," 23; Martini, "Alcuni aspetti," 225.

⁷⁹ Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nella vita," 437.

⁸⁰ Joseph Abdilla, "Dun Ġorġ: Żejt ġdid għas-seklu," *Dun Ġorġ* 27 (1987): 21.

⁸¹ Lawrenz Cachia, "L-ispirtu profetiku f'Dun Ġorġ," *Dun Ġorġ* 4 (1973): 3.

⁸² This was a result of the Protestant Reformation which had taken place in the preceding centuries. The advent of the British colonial administration in Catholic Malta in 1800 saw the systematic introduction of other religions in the island, see Vincenzo Borg, "Alcuni orientamenti pastorali di rilievo nella chiesa di Malta durante l'800 e nei primi decenni del '900," in *Meliten.: Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Georgii Preca*, 95-118.

⁸³ Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 1:190-199, 205-220; *ibid.*, 2: *passim*.

⁸⁴ Paul N. Calleja, "Dun Ġorġ: Katakista," *Dun Ġorġ* 9-10 (1975-1976): 31. For an Italian translation of this article, see Calleja, "Don Giorgio catechista," in *Meliten.: Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Georgii Preca*, 42-144; Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca: Hajja*, 3:239-260.

nourishment and inspiration for their daily lives. The fact that Preca introduced the laity to the reading and the study of the Bible was so avant-garde for his time that it brought on him the condemnation of some people who considered him as drifting towards a Protestant position.⁸⁵ The fruits of the change brought about by *Dei Verbum* make it very difficult for us today to comprehend the novelty which Ćorġ Preca introduced when he entrusted the Bible to the laity. The lay people whom he met were so fervent in their love for the Word of God that many of them literally engaged themselves in memorising entire biblical passages, in order to be able to teach them to others.⁸⁶

The exhortation made in *Dei Verbum* no. 22 for the wide spread dissemination of the Bible, opened the way for yet another task which emerged as a result of this call to spread the Word of God. "The Council hopes for a wide distribution of the Bible, and this means translations in all the different modern languages."⁸⁷ These translations were aimed at certifying that the Word of God reached everyone indiscriminately at all times.⁸⁸ Preca created the right conditions for making the Bible significant to the faithful, especially to the members of the Society of Christian Doctrine, so that they in their turn could be able to pass it on to others. Consequently, although he did not make an entire linguistic translation of the Bible, he explained the significance of Sacred Scripture through his works, using different methods. In this respect, Preca was a forerunner of *Dei Verbum* no. 22 which describes the necessity and the character of a biblical pastoral ministry to provide 'easy access to Sacred Scriptures.' This includes promoting the translation and distribution of the Bible as well as providing people with the resources and the opportunities to enter into a life-relevant dialogue with the Word of God.⁸⁹

When *Dei Verbum* no. 22 speaks about and encourages the spreading of the Bible, it does so in order to enable an easy access to the Bible to everyone. *Dei Verbum* does not limit this access of the Bible just to the physical access of the printed book but also envisages access to the literal sense of the text: the story of a privileged people chosen by God who received a manifestation of God in history; and access to the Bible; as a text which carries a particular message for everyone today.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Emanuel Curmi, "Dun Ćorġ u l-lajċi," *Dun Ćorġ* 34 (1994): 19.

⁸⁶ Abdilla, "Dun Ćorġ: żejt ġdid," 21.

⁸⁷ Schutz and Thurian, *Revelation*, 74.

⁸⁸ *DV*, no. 22; Schutz and Thurian, *Revelation*, 75.

⁸⁹ Claudio Ettl, "The Rediscovery of the Word of God: The Second Vatican Council and the *Dei Verbum*," *Bulletin Dei Verbum* 72/73, no. 3-4 (2004): 7.

⁹⁰ Santiago Guijarro Oporto, "L'accesso alla Sacra Scrittura," *Firmana: Quaderni di teologia e pastorale* 11 (1996): 29.

The models and the methods of the use of the Bible in the written works of Dun Ġorġ were intended to render the message of Sacred Scripture intelligible and applicable to the daily life of the people. Even in this respect, Ġorġ Preca was a precursor of *Dei Verbum*, because it is futile to have access to the Bible if this is not explained and applied to the daily life of the faithful.⁹¹ To some extent one can compare the works of Dun Ġorġ to what was referred to as the *biblia pauperum* - the Bible in illustrated form. Preca did not produce or publish any illustrations, nor draw episodes from the Bible, but all his writings were aimed at rendering the episodes found in the Bible clearer and intelligible to others. During Vatican Council II, the Church was preoccupied with the lack of understanding of Sacred Scripture that prevailed at that time. Through *Dei Verbum*, the Church wanted to establish a pastoral biblical movement towards a much more conscious understanding of the Word of God. The Church wanted the Bible to become the handbook for the fundamental nourishment of the believer.⁹²

The reason why Ġorġ Preca wrote most of his works was to teach others to live a truly Christian life based on the Word of God. At times in his writings, Preca himself explicitly declares his aim by saying that he was explaining the Word of God so that maximum benefit could be achieved through its reading, meditation and knowledge, since there was no benefit in simply repeating texts from Sacred Scripture blindly, without understanding what one is saying. It is when one comprehends what one is saying that one appreciates the Word of God to the full, and ultimately puts it into practice. *Dei Verbum* no. 23 specifically emphasizes that all the explanations of the books and of texts of Sacred Scripture must be made according to the Magisterium of the Church and under its supervision, because only in this way can the Word of God be rendered as an illumination to the mind of the faithful, strengthen their will, and kindle their hearts to God.⁹³ Preca was aware of this in his writings. In fact, when he was teaching people verbally he was more tolerant as to the words which he used. However, when it came to writing, he was much more attentive and precise since, as the Latin proverb states: *verba volant, scripta manent*. Preca was aware that whatever he wrote had to be in perfect harmony with the teaching of the Church because these writings were to be accessible to many. Consequently, he did not leave any space for doubt in his writings, but was very clear and to the point.

Notwithstanding these activities initiated by Preca, which identify him as a pioneer in the use of the Bible in Malta and a precursor of Vatican Council II, we must not overestimate his works. We must study his works critically. We must acknowledge that he was not a biblical scholar. All that he had acquired

⁹¹ Guijarro Oporto, "L'accesso," 31.

⁹² *DV*, no. 23; Martini, "La Sacra Scrittura nella vita," 441-442.

⁹³ *DV*, no. 23; Schutz and Thurian, *Revelation*, 75-76.

and learnt, he had achieved through the priestly formation which he received at the Seminary, which was a product of the particular era in which Preca lived. Consequently, while being very innovative, Preca was also very limited.⁹⁴

The Bible: A Catalyst for a Revival of Spiritual Life

The end result expected by *Dei Verbum* in the reallocation of the Bible to its central role in the Church is that just as the Eucharistic mystery helps in the growth and in the maturity of the life of the Church, so does a new impulse of the Word of God bring about an increase in spiritual life.⁹⁵ Ġorġ Preca, and the Maltese people living during his time, experienced this through Preca's life. One can conclude that the saintly life which Preca lived, as proclaimed by the Church through his beatification in 2001, and his canonisation in 2007, is the end result of a life lived in constant contact with, prayer, and reflection on the Word of God.

The homily which St John Paul II delivered during Ġorġ Preca's beatification in 2001, demonstrate the freshness with which this Maltese saint made use of the Bible to revamp the faith of his Maltese contemporaries. In this respect, Preca remains also a model for us today.

Was it not Dun Gorg's ability to communicate the freshness of the Christian message that made him the great apostle that he was? Is this not what Malta needs today: clergy, religious, catechists, teachers, who passionately proclaim the Good News of what the Father has done for us? At the dawn of a new millennium, the Church looks to you, Malta, to be still more ardent in living your apostolic and missionary vocation! The whole Church looks to you!⁹⁶

It is therefore no exaggeration to call Ġorġ Preca a great apostle of the Word of God, and a precursor of what the Second Vatican Council was to proclaim in its Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*.

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⁹⁴ Abdilla, "Dun Ġorġ: Żejt ġdid," 21.

⁹⁵ *DV*, no. 26.

⁹⁶ John Paul II, "Homiliae 2 : Melitae in Beatificatione Trium Servorum Dei, 9 Maii 2001," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 93 (2001): 595.