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BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN 'DEI VERBUM'

THIS is one of the four Dogmatic Constitutions promulgated by the Council. Its importance is shown by its stormy passage through the Council's deliberations: it was one of the very first to be put on the table of the Council and one of the last to be finally approved in its final form. No less than five drafts were presented for the study of the Council Fathers, each one with substantial changes in such a way as to produce a text which would gain the assent of an almost unanimous vote. The history of this document – which, one might say, is the history of the council itself – is important to understand the whole text of the Constitution: one notes the gradual progress of the Council in extricating itself from the straightjacket of formal static abstract conceptual theology of the schools into the liberty of the Biblical and patristic tradition. It is the outcome of two different mentalities, the one bent on preserving the old formulae and condemning anything which smacks of novelty and the other one conscious of the change through which human thinking is passing and of the progress done in the last fifty years or so in positive theology, especially Biblical Interpretation. We limit ourselves to notical interpretation, in chapter three. But first we give an outline of the history of the Constitution.

HISTORY OF THE CONSTITUTION

The first draft was prepared by the Preparatory Theological Commission and presented to the Council for discussion on November 14th, 1962 and rejected by the majority of the Fathers as too much scholastic in tone, too polemic, uninspiring and rather cool towards free scientific research especially with respect to Biblical Studies. As the majority was just below two thirds Pope John had to intervene. He appointed a new joint commission including the Secretariate for Christian Unity with the express purpose of drafting a new one in a more pastoral and ecumenical spirit.

A second draft was prepared between the first and the second session. It was circularised amongst the Bishops in May 1963; it was again thrown away either because it dealt not with topical questions or because certain themes could not be treated in a Conciliar document of this kind. Hence it was not discussed in the second session.

In March 1964 another commission was appointed to revise the second draft in the light of the 280 amendments received from the Bishops. The amended draft was presented for discussion by the Council Fathers on October 1964. This draft was generally welcomed as more positive in its approach and ecumenical in its spirit. Various observations were presented by the Fathers out of which the fifth and final draft was born. It was approved and promulgated on November 11th, 1965 with only six negative votes.

This bare historical outline shows us with what care and thoroughness the commissions were about their work and succeeded in producing a dynamic document opening new roads and lines of approach for the solution of the problems involved rather than raising defensive barriers around past positions and just immobilizing all further research as the original scheme tended to do; it is a document positive in its content, eschewing any negative attitude, and encouraging for all those who with good will, foresight and zeal go about their work in interpreting Holy Scripture.

The Constitution is divided into six chapters: The first chapter deals with Revelation in itself; the second with its transmission through Holy Scripture and Oral Tradition; the third with Holy Scripture and its interpretation; the fourth with the Old Testament; the fifth with the New Testament and finally the sixth with the place of the Scriptures in the life of the Church.

There were many and manifold points on which the Fathers found it difficult to reach an agreement, but I think that the most difficult was that on the nature of Tradition and its relation to Holy Scripture; the second point was that of the historicity and interpretation of the Gospels; on other points the forward looking Fathers did not find it too much difficult to gain the support of their confreres once misunderstandings and panic were dissipated.

Here we are interested in the principles of Biblical interpretation laid down by the Council in chapter three. To understand their nature and importance one should go back through the history of Catholic Biblical Interpretation and Scholarship in the last sixty years or so.

CATHOLIC BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP IN THE LAST 60 YEARS

Criticism means to examine, to separate, to judge and to classify. Biblical criticism is not to take Biblical documents at their face value, but to examine them as to their textual reliability, their literary form, their historical value. Biblical criticism therefore is the application to the Biblical records of the same principles of interpretation used in the interpretation and evaluation of profane documents, literary or otherwise. Those who admit the sacred nature of the Bible would take this in their consideration; others would simply have them as purely human documents subject to formal error.

This type of Biblical interpretation started within Catholic circles in the 16th century with Andrea Masius (1574). Before that time the Sacred Books were put in one lump and commented upon without paying too much attention to critical problems. The case of Galileo in 1633 alerted theologians and Scriptural scholars to new problems due to scientific observations and discoveries. R. Simon, a Catholic priest is known as the father of biblical literary criticism. Later on another Catholic, Jean D'Astruc, applies literary analysis to Genesis (1766).

Unfortunately this literary criticism, good in itself, was taken over by rationalists to discredit the Bible by reducing it to a purely human document subject to all kinds of errors, real or imaginary. In the middle of the last century the results of scientific discovery and archaeological activity posed new problems for the Biblical Interpreter.

Pope Pius IX included this proposition in his Syllabus of Errors: *The prophecies and miracles set forth and recorded in the Sacred Scriptures are the fiction of poets, and the mysteries of the Christian faith the results of philosophical investigations. In the books of the Old Testament and the New Testament there are contained mythical inventions, and Jesus Christ is Himself a myth.* (EB 74).

The French Bishops proposed that the problem of Biblical Interpretation be tackled by the First Vatican Council and offered their own suggestions. But the Council could not take up the matter; it was inherited by Pope Leo XIII and his successors, who in the course of time have given wise directives through their encyclical letters, decrees and instructions.

In the meantime new problems were arising. Archaeology confirmed the general outline of Biblical history, but new difficulties arose through the mass of new literary and documentary material recovered from the sand and soil of the Near East. Israel is no longer an isolated people,

but henceforth her history, beliefs and customs must be inserted in the full stream of contemporary general culture, the more so since we are in a better position now to establish general chronology and relate it to the Biblical data where possible.

Scholars became aware that the concept of inspiration as formulated in the past aprioristic speculation does not hold good any more; and that not all the biblical documents or records are of the same literary type or form. At the end of the century – after a long time without any exegete to speak of – Catholic Biblical scholars, under the influence of the attacks on Biblical inerrancy, inspiration and sacredness, proposed several solutions for these new basic problems. The Magisterium however rejected these pioneering attempts as insufficient and inadequate, but left the doors open for further research and study.

Leo XIII encouraged these studies by the publication of the great Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* in 1893, the *Magna Charta* of Biblical studies, established the Pontifical Biblical Commission with the express purpose not only of controlling these studies but also of actively promoting them. He had the idea of founding the Biblical Institute in Rome, which later was founded by Pope St. Pius X in 1908. Moreover Father Lagrange founded the School in Jerusalem and the *Revue Biblique*. Unfortunately the crisis of Modernism checked any steady progress in this field; the decrees emanated in this period to serve as guiding lines were in effect more of a hindrance than a help. Add to this, World War I stopped all activity.

In 1920 Benedict XV published the Encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus* on the occasion of the centenary of St. Jerome's death. He insisted on the reading of the Scriptures and refuted some false interpretations of Jerome's words with respect to Biblical historical writings. It is rather apologetic in tone and with very little of a positive doctrinal value.

Pius XI refused definitely to take any position before Catholic scholars had done their job, that is, gone deeply into the problems involved and prepared the ground for a definite declaration by the Magisterium. He emanated norms for the scientific study of the Scriptures and for their teaching in the Seminaries and other Institutions; took other provisions to put on a solid bases the study and use of the Bible in Christian Life. He personally encouraged all those who dedicated themselves to this study and silenced the obscurantist and the timid.

The words of the Pope went not unheeded by Catholic Biblical Scholars, and the fruits of their labours were harvested by Pope Pius XII and garnered in the crisp latin of the Encyclical Letter: *Divino Afflante*

Spiritu, published on the fiftieth anniversary of the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* of Leo XIII on September 30th 1943.

This letter is positive in its approach, dynamic in its vision, and optimistic in its spirit. The best way to tackle the problems involved is to offer positive solutions, putting aside the untenable positions of the past.

The Supreme Pontiff lays down the principles for interpretation: the search for the *literal* sense, that is the meaning actually intended by the sacred writer; to draw out the spiritual sense and the theological doctrine of a given text or whole book; to reach this goal one must make full use of all subsidiary sciences such as philology, archaeology, history, geography etc., taking into full consideration the Magisterium of the Church, the tradition of the Fathers, the *analogia fidei*, the Ancient versions, such as the Septuagint, the Vulgate and others.

The most important contribution in this encyclical was the formulation of the theory on which to base the application of the so called *genera literaria* or literary forms to Biblical interpretation. This principle was proposed by some Biblical exegetes at the beginning of the century to defend the inerrancy of the Scriptures, but it was rejected in the form it was proposed. After thirty years of solid study of the newly discovered oriental literatures, one could reconsider the whole position with more confidence and hope of success.

The basic principle enunciated is that God, the primary author of the Sacred Scriptures, made use, as if of an instrument, of the human writer, the secondary writer, with all his characteristics; such as culture, mentality, defects, language, ways of expressions. This is the theory of instrumentality elaborated by St. Thomas following the steps of the ancient Fathers. Hence God spoke to us in the Bible — and indeed on all occasions of self-revelation — in our own way, much in the same way that his Son took human form and nature through the mystery of the Incarnation. This is the doctrine of St. John Chrysostom: the *sun-kata-basis*, the condescension of God towards man.

The Bible is essentially literature written in a given period of human history; hence the writers must have necessarily made use of all those literary devices and artifices, in common use amongst the peoples to whom they wrote. They had to speak to them in the same language and in the way adapted to their respective mentality and their ways of thinking and speaking. Among these one notes the *genera literaria* or literary forms: thus the Bible becomes a collection of various literary works of art not all of one and the same form. One finds: dramatic dialogue,

poetry, prose, hymns, lamentations, prophecy, narrative, etc. as in any other literature. Thus if one wants seriously to find out the intention of the sacred writer and the meaning he wants to convey one must take into full consideration the literary form used by him. A dramatist expresses a truth in his own special way dictated by the dramatic form; a historian would express the same truth in a totally different way dictated by historical method.

Thus the Biblical interpreter must first of all engage himself not only in textual criticism to establish the authenticity and integrity of the document in his hands, but also in form criticism, that is, he must find out to what literary category or form it belongs, whether it is a psalm, a narrative, a hymn, etc. Thus the literary form of the first eleven chapters of Genesis are absolutely different from those in the rest of the Bible and the more so from our ways of writing about the origin of the world around us.

Obviously these literary forms must not be formulated *a priori* and then imposed on the Biblical text but established *a posteriori* after a careful examination of all the available evidence, biblical and extra-biblical. And as long as a literary form does not contradict the over all inerrancy, it has full right of citizenship within the Biblical library.

This was a great liberating principle which was unanimously acclaimed by Catholic exegetes and non-Catholics alike. These norms gave rise to a renewed Catholic Biblical activity at all levels; scientific, popular literature and also more use of the Bible in pastoral work.

As a consequence of this activity some asked that the decrees promulgated at the beginning of the century with respect to Biblical Criticism be withdrawn; instead of withdrawing them the Holy See gave them a new positive interpretation as in the case of the decree on the Origin of the Pentateuch and the literary form of the first chapters of Genesis in a letter to Cardinal Suhard where the Pontifical Biblical Commission taking into full account all the positive gains in the last fifty years of Pentateuchal criticism admitted the existence of written or oral documents and the special characteristics of the first chapters of Genesis.

But not all were faithful to the lines laid down by the Encyclical and the Ecclesiastical authority had to intervene again, not to disembody the words of the *Divino Afflante Spiritu* but to give them an authentic interpretation and reject, not the methods recommended in the Encyclical, but rather their use to propagate certain postulates of the so called New Theology which tended to consider as simple myths all the Biblical

narratives and admit errors of all kinds in the Biblical texts. These correctives were formulated in the Encyclical: *Humani Generis* of 1950. Instructions were issued regulating the teaching of the Scriptures in the Universities and Seminaries under the jurisdiction of the Sacred Congregation of Studies. Also these were very positive in their approach and optimistic in their spirit.

Work went on on these lines until the convening of the Vatican Council. Just before its assembling in Rome some persons still attached to older forms, but no less moved by their attachment to the Church, made a serious and determined effort to put on the breaks on progressive exegesis. It was the struggle between two mentalities; the one trained on conceptual theology bent on applying aprioristic abstractions to an eminently historical and empirical document as the Biblical Records and the other basing itself on empirical investigation before establishing principles of interpretation. The ecclesiastical authority intervened whenever there was danger of any one of these tendencies getting out of hand.

These same tendencies came to the fore again during the deliberations of the Council: the first scheme proposed represented exclusively the ideas of the conceptualists; the empiricists, so to label them, protested. Out of this struggle there emerged a document of the utmost value for Biblical science harmonizing into a marvellous organic unity the two tendencies: As we shall see it ratified all the positive work done during the last twenty years following the *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and confirming the basic principles of the new methods.

THE PRINCIPLES ENUNCIATED IN THE CONSTITUTION 'DEI VERBUM'

THE TRUTH INTENDED IN THE SACRED SCRIPTURES

Before finding the methods and means for a correct interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures one must establish firmly the intention of the writer or rather of God in giving us these books. In chapter I the Council affirms that Sacred Scripture is one of the means for the transmission of Revelation, granted by God to man *for his salvation*, hence the object of Divine Revelation is truth in connexion with Divine providence for our salvation. It is this salvific truth that is to be found in Sacred Scripture. In the words of the Council: *Cum ergo omne id quod auctores inspirati seu hagiographi asserunt, retineri debeat assertum a Spiritu Sancto, inde Scripturae libri veritatem, quam Deus nostrae salutis causa Litteris Sacris consignari voluit firmiter, fideliter, et sine errore*

docere profitendi sunt. (§ 11)

The key word or phrase is: *nostrae salutis causa*. This was introduced into the text of the fourth draft. In the first and second draft it is said only that there is no error in Sacred Scripture; in the third it is said that truth is taught without any error: *veritatem sine ullo errore docere profitendi sunt*. In the fourth draft the qualifying adjective *salutaris* is added and we have *veritatem salutarem*. This text was modified again under the pressure of many Fathers and that of the Pope himself into this form: *veritatem, quam Deus nostrae salutis causa Litteris Sacris consignari voluit*. Note also that while in the fourth draft it is said: *sine ullo errore* in the final one we read: *sine errore*.

Many Fathers wished that the object of inerrancy be clearly defined or circumscribed, hence the introduction of the qualifying adjective *salutaris*. But this qualification formulated in this way would have been interpreted as excluding *historical facts* as outside the sphere of inerrancy. Hence the insistence on the part of many Fathers and the Pope himself to change it into a relative clause: the truth, which God intended to put on record in the Sacred Scriptures for our salvation, that is, this truth may be spiritual reality or even historical facts. Thus the ambivalence of the text was removed. The danger of distinguishing between truth relevant to salvation and hence guaranteed by inerrancy, and truth which in itself is indifferent to it and excluded from the sphere of inerrancy, is excluded. Such a distinction, mostly subjective, would have reduced the Biblical inerrancy to a very small affair indeed.

The practical importance of this statement, the first one in any ecclesiastical document in which the writing of the Sacred Scriptures is put in relation to God's salvific providence, may be very far reaching for the interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures especially for Biblical Theology, which forms the main object of modern contemporary Biblical scholarship. This is in line with the teaching formulated already by St. Augustine and St. Thomas.

THE INTENTION OF THE WRITER

From all this it appears how much important it is to establish the intention of the writer as to what he really wanted to say. The object of this intention is to fall within the sphere of salvific truth, which may be mediated to us both through divine words and historical facts, as it is explicitly stated in paragraph 14 of this constitution. Hence the Council passes on to establish certain main principles of interpretation whereby the interpreter may arrive to determine the mind of the sacred writer. In

other words one must establish the literal sense or meaning of a given text.

LITERARY FORMS

We have seen already how the question of literary forms, tackled unsuccessfully at the beginning of the century, stood in abeyance for the first 40 years or so, and how it was taken up again by Pope Pius XII in the Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. We have seen also the aftermath of the words of the Supreme Pontiff with all the disarray in some quarters. Now the Council Fathers face the problem squarely and roundly in the face: *Ad hagiographorum intentionem eruendam inter alia etiam genera litteraria respicienda sunt. Aliter atque aliter veritas in textibus vario modo historicis vel propheticis, vel poeticis, vel in aliis dicendi generibus proponitur et exprimitur.*

The Constitution introduces this statement by reminding us that God spoke to us, *modo humano*, in the manner of men. Now we know that the meaning of a text or document is not discovered by looking only in the dictionary for the meaning of the individual words, and then at grammar to find out their philological relation in the sentence structure and so on, but one should also establish the nature of the literary composition, namely whether it be a technical scientific document, a legal document, a historical document or pure literature. Obviously the same word, say, *justice*, means one thing in a legal document and another in a theological book. A sunrise description in a poem is totally different from the same description in an astronomical work; the word *animal* means one thing in a philosophical treatise and another in a biological textbook.

It is completely wrong therefore to treat the Biblical text under its human aspect as if it were different from other books. Hence one must look at them critically, taking the form in its good sense, that is with a discerning eye, to classify the Biblical books accordingly. Hence one must not stop at philological and linguistical consideration and leave out rhetorical questions. One should go beyond that and classify the Biblical writings according to the literary forms used in the time of their composition, and then interpret them according to the principles at the basis of each literary type.

Thus the Bible from one single book to be interpreted on the same basic literary principles becomes a whole collection of Books including all or almost all possible literary forms: poetry, narratives, hymns, psalms, fiction and so on, each requiring its own principles of interpretation.

It would not be true to say that these distinctions were not admitted in Catholic exegesis before the Council or the *Divino Afflante Spiritu*; but today especially after the last decade's intensive study following on the wake of the Pius XII's encyclical one has to be more careful about them and admit more subtle distinctions, especially when one is treating a narrative text. The Constitution itself admits that not all narratives are of the same type and kind: *vario modo historicis*, we read in the third draft and the final one. Thus the narratives in the first eleven chapters of Genesis are not of the same type as those dealing with Abraham's history. One finds religious history attributing everything to God as the primary cause, religious-national history and so on.

MODES OF SPEECH

It is not enough to establish the literary form of a text, but one must also take into full consideration the modes of speech of the time of the writer, the ways of thinking and expressing himself, as the Constitution reminds us: *rite attendendum est . . . tum ad illos, qui hoc aevo in mutuo hominum commercio adhiberi solebant.*

In other words we should not approach a text with our own mentality and ways of speech, but get into the spirit and mind of the sacred authors, children of another age and culture.

HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Another factor which is of paramount importance in understanding a given text or literary composition is the circumstance of time and place: *Oportet porro in determinatis adiunctis hagiographus, pro sui temporis et suae culturae condicione . . . intenderit et expressit.* This is what is commonly known among scholarly circles the *sitz im leben*, the conditions under which a literary work was written: when, by whom, for whom, and for what purpose. To take one example: was a given Psalm say, written for private recital or for public use in the liturgy? Were the Patriarchal stories handed down from generation to generation for the purpose of maintaining national unity and moulding the souls of the younger generation and comforting the older one? All these points affect the understanding of these narratives and make us relegate to the past the one time unconvincing solutions of apparent difficulties and antinomies in the Biblical text.

THE BOOK OF GOD

The Bible is a divine book having God as its author, therefore in

addition to the human criteria applicable for the understanding of a human book one must add the ones required by the divine nature of this Book.

These criteria are listed in this passage: *Sed cum Sacra Scriptura eodem Spiritu, quo scripta est, etiam legenda et interpretanda sit, ad recte sacrorum textum sensum eruendum non minus diligenter respiciendum est at contentum et unitatem totius Scripturae ratione habita vivae totius Ecclesiae Traditionis et analogiae fidei.*

In this text three theological principles flowing from the unique origin of the Sacred Book, namely its being the book of God, are enlisted:

(a) the interpretation of a particular text must find its proper place in the over all development of Revelation and progressive evolution of Salvation history. The whole Biblical collection, being the work of the Holy Spirit, cannot contradict itself.

(b) the *analogia fidei*, that is, the principle according to which no datum of revelation can contradict another datum in the same Revelation. Hence no interpretation of a given text can contradict the content of another text. In such a case one of the two must be discarded and the text subjected to deeper studies.

(c) The third one is *conformity with the Tradition* of the Church. It is not our purpose to enter into the question of the relation of Sacred Scripture and Tradition, which is dealt by the Council in the second chapter of the Constitution. One thing we have to say here, that is, if Tradition and Holy Scripture have the same origin in the Holy Spirit, then there cannot be any contradiction between them.

By applying properly these three basic principles the exegete can understand, clarify, illustrate the Biblical texts and draw their theological content and present it to the people of God yearning for the bread of life.

THE MAGISTERIUM

This brings us to one final point, namely, the relation between the *Magisterium* and the *exegete*. We have seen already how Pope Pius XI refused to take any stand before the exegetes have done their homework. This basic principle in the intellectual life of the Church is re-emphasized in the Constitution under consideration in these words: *Exegetarum autem est secundum has regulas adlaborare ad Sacrae Scripturae sensum penitius intelligendum et exponendum, ut quasi praeparato studio, iudicium Ecclesiae maturetur. Cuncta enim haec, de ratione interpretandi Scripturam, Ecclesiae iudicio ultime subsunt, quae verbi*

Dei servandi et interpretandi divino fungitur mandato et ministerio.

This enunciation determines the place of the exegete in the study process of the word of God and its exposition to the people of God: he must prepare the ground for any possible intervention, and this happens only on special occasions, on the part of the *Magisterium*. During this period of gestation, so to say, the exegete, without giving up courage, vision and audacity in opening new ways of investigation and breaking new ground and proposing new, it may be, radical solutions, must use prudent judgement and discretion and be prepared to submit to the final judgement of the Church Teaching authority; on the other hand the faithful, most of them quite unfamiliar with the problems involved and unready to accept and assimilate the new advances must judge these pioneers in a spirit of charity and humility and trust.

CONCLUSION:

Thus we see that the constitution *Dei Verbum* with respect to Bible interpretation is the climax in the whole process of Catholic Biblical Scholarship in the last fifty years or so. We have followed the whole movement from its beginnings in the time of Leo XIII, through the modernism crisis, which put the Church on the defensive, but not out of positive action; solutions proposed were unacceptable for lack of maturity and study in depth, new evidence was being constantly brought forward for study. In the period between the two wars much work had been done the results of which one finds listed in the Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which opened a new era in Catholic Biblical Scholarship. A period of enthusiastic and hectic activity followed not without its deviations, but on the whole the result as a whole was positive and now we find the fruit of all this labour enshrined in a Church Document of the utmost authority and importance. It is a highly encouraging document for the Biblical exegete and for all the faithful who want to return from cold scholastic formulae to the warmth of the Biblical language.

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