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DEI VERBUM AND REVELATION

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The 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops met in Rome (24 November to 8 December) to celebrate the Second Vatican Council (which had ended twenty years earlier on 8 December 1965), to evaluate the Council's role in the postconciliar Church, and to develop some principles for the further reception of its teaching.¹ The final report of the synod produced six principles for interpreting the sixteen conciliar texts.²

Avery Dulles paraphrased the first principle as follows: "Each passage and document of the Council must be interpreted in the context of all the others, so that the integral meaning of the Council may be rightly grasped."³ Presupposing that meaning and truth are to be found in the whole, this principle recalled approaches to the Scriptures that interpret the texts in the light of the final, canonical

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¹See G. Alberigo and J. Provost, ed., *Synod 1985: An Evaluation*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986.

²*The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod*, Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986.

³A. Dulles, "The Reception of Vatican II at the Extraordinary Synod of 1985," in G. Alberigo, J.-P. Jossua, and J.A. Komonchak, ed., *The Reception of Vatican II*, Washington: DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1987, 349-63, at 350.

form of the entire Bible.⁴ Yet the synod's report added at once a second principle that brought to mind another scriptural approach: namely, those interpretations which in various ways presuppose a "canon within the canon."⁵ "The four major constitutions of the Council," the report states, "are the hermeneutical key for the other decrees and declarations."⁶ These constitutions are, in chronological order of their promulgation, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*).

If these four constitutions provide such a "hermeneutical key," does one of them, as a kind of "primus inter pares" enjoy a certain primacy over the other three when we set ourselves to interpret Vatican II and its teaching? Many scholars and others have assigned this primacy to *Lumen Gentium*, but, given the priority of divine revelation over the doctrine of the church (which is derived from revelation), it would be preferable to name *Dei Verbum* in first place. Jared Wicks rightly commented on certain editions of the conciliar documents:

Some editions place *Lumen Gentium* at the head of the Vatican II constitutions, but would not the conciliar ecclesiology be better contextualized if it were placed *after* the council text starting with 'hearing the word of God reverently and proclaiming it confidently...' and ending with 'the word of God... stands forever,' as does *Dei Verbum*?⁷

Wicks, Christoph Theobald and others make a persuasive case for the primacy of *Dei Verbum* when interpreting the conciliar teaching.

Naming *Dei Verbum* "the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" implies that the self-revelation of God, even if explicitly

⁴ See the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993, 50–53, 93–94.

⁵ DV itself adopts a version of the "canon within the canon," when it endorses the special place of the four Gospels ("they are deservedly pre-eminent") within all the books of the Bible (no. 18).

⁶Dulles, 350.

⁷J. Wicks, "Vatican II on Revelation—From Behind the Scenes," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010) 637–50, at 639. In various publications, C. Theobald has also assigned a pivotal role to *Dei Verbum* for interpreting the sixteen conciliar texts; see M. Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012, 127–28, 181.

addressed only by the first chapter, takes precedence over what follows on tradition (Chapter 2) and the inspired Scriptures (Chapter 3 to 6). All of this suggests how supremely important it is to present correctly Chapter 1 of *Dei Verbum*, along with what can be gleaned about divine revelation from other passages in the conciliar documents. Let me take up this task in three stages, and glean what the constitution clearly develops about revelation, what it barely touches on, and what needs to be added from some of the other fifteen conciliar texts.

Six Clear Themes from *Dei Verbum*

At least six themes about God's revelation emerge as clearly developed by *Dei Verbum*.⁸ (1) First of all, right from the beginning *Dei Verbum* presents revelation as primarily being God's self-disclosure. After quoting 1 Jn 1:2–3 about the Word, who is divine Life and Light in person, "appearing to us" (no. 1), the constitution states firmly: "it pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the sacrament (*sacramentum*) of his will (see Eph 1:9)" (no. 2). The tripersonal God took the initiative to enter freely into a dialogue of love with human beings, so that through responding with integral faith they may receive salvation. Along with 1 Jn 1:2–3 and Eph 1:9, the opening chapter of *Dei Verbum* (no. 4) cites a third, classical New Testament text that also indicates the personal character of the divine self-revelation: "after God spoke in many places and numerous ways in the prophets, lastly in these days he has spoken to us in [his] Son" (Heb 1:1–2).

The opening chapter of *Dei Verbum* makes it repeatedly clear that revelation *primarily* means the self-revelation of God or of Truth (in upper case) itself. *Secondarily*, of course, the divine revelation discloses something about God and human beings. The interpersonal 'dia-logue', which is God's self-communication, says and communicates information. Through encountering the divine Truth in person, human beings know new truths.

Hence the second chapter of *Dei Verbum* opens as follows: "God most kindly (benignissime) arranged that *the things which he had revealed* for the salvation of all peoples should remain integrally

⁸On the making of *DV*, see R. Burigana, *La Bibbia nel Concilio: La redazione della costituzione Dei Verbum*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998; J. Wicks, "Pieter Smulders and *Dei Verbum*," *Gregorianum* 82 (2001) 241–77; 559–93; *Gregorianum* 83 (2002), 225–67; *Gregorianum* 85 (2004), 242–77; *Gregorianum* 86 (2005), 92–134.

throughout time, and be transmitted to all generations" (DV 7; emphasis added). Since it deals with the transmission of revelation, that same chapter naturally speaks of "all revealed things" (no. 9) and uses a classic term for the content of the revelation communicated through Christ and his apostles: "all that it [the official magisterium] proposes to be believed as being divinely revealed it draws from this one *deposit of faith*" (no. 10; emphasis added). At the end, *Dei Verbum* talks of "the treasure of revelation entrusted to the Church" (no. 26), which she should faithfully preserve and proclaim.

The distinction *Dei Verbum* makes between the primary and secondary sense of revelation is expressed in an appropriate style of language. It highlights *the* mystery (singular) of the tripersonal God revealed through Christ in the history of salvation and inviting human beings to share in a new communion of love. This choice of mystery in the singular follows not only the verse cited from Eph 1:9 (see above) but also other passages from the Pauline letters (e.g. Rom 16:25–26; Eph 3:4, 9; 6:19; Col 1:27; 4:3). Revelation primarily means meeting the Mystery of God in person and only secondarily knowing the divine mysteries (plural and in lower case). Talk of "the mystery" forms a leitmotif in *Dei Verbum*; five times the constitution speaks of "mystery" in the singular (nos. 2, 15, 17, 24, and 26) and never of "the mysteries" in the plural. The same tendency shows up in other texts promulgated by Vatican II: the sixteen documents use "mystery" in the singular 106 times and "mysteries" in the plural only 22 times.

Right from his first encyclical, Blessed John Paul II (pope 1978–2005) exemplified the same tendency. *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) spoke 59 times of "the mystery of redemption," "the paschal mystery," "the mystery of Christ," "the mystery of the divine economy," and so forth, without ever using the term "mystery" in the plural.⁹ The 1980 papal encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* followed suit, referring 39 times to "the mystery" (of God, of Christ, and so forth) and only twice to "mysteries."

Over the primary and secondary sense of revelation, Vatican II differs from Vatican I. In its constitution on divine faith (*Dei Filius* of 1870), the First Vatican Council, while once talking of God "revealing

⁹ On what he called "*reductio in mysterium*," see Karl Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, translated by K. Smyth, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1968, 36–73; "Reflections on Methodology in Theology," vol. 11, translated by D. Bourke (1974), 68–114.

himself" (DzH 3004; ND 113),¹⁰ in general understood divine revelation to be primarily God communicating the divine truths (plural), which otherwise would be inaccessible to human reason or at best known only with difficulty. This entailed presenting human faith as submitting to the divine "authority" and believing to be true "that which God has revealed" (DzH 3008; ND 118); it also entailed speaking of "the mysteries" (plural) "contained in divine revelation" (DzH 3041; ND 137; see DzH 3016–17; ND 132–3). After Vatican I, a development of doctrine intervenes when Vatican II presents divine revelation as being primarily the self-disclosure of God and not primarily the manifestation of divine truths which would otherwise not be known. There has been a shift from "knowing about God" to "knowing God" personally.

(2) A second theme concerns the nature of revelation as *salvific* and *sacramental*. Right from its prologue *Dei Verbum* indicates how God's self-revelation and the offer of salvation coincide. Vatican II wanted "the whole world" to hear "the summons to salvation" (no. 1). The plan or "economy of revelation" is, more or less, synonymous with "the history of salvation" (no. 2). Repeatedly and without hesitation, the constitution passes from the language of revelation to that of salvation, and then back to revelation (e.g., nos. 3, 4, 6, 7, 14, 15, 17, and 21). Thus it recognises that we deal with two inseparable, if distinguishable, realities. God's revealing word necessarily offers salvation. In Johannine terms, since Jesus is *the Truth* in person, he is also *the Life* in person.

When enunciating the Easter mystery, *Dei Verbum* deftly links revelation and salvation: through his life, death, and resurrection (along with the sending of the Holy Spirit), Christ revealed that "God is with us, to deliver us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to eternal life" (no. 4). The self-revelation of God and redemptive deliverance of human beings go hand in hand.

As something which applies equally to the "economy of revelation" and "the history of salvation," *Dei Verbum* puts on display sacramental language. When administering the sacraments, the

¹⁰ "DzH" abbreviates Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, ed., *Enchiridion Symbolorum, Definitionum et Declarationum* (17th edn.; Freiburg: Herder, 1991); "ND" abbreviates Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith* (7th edn.; Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2001).

words and actions of persons interact to communicate God's revelation and salvation: thus,

this economy of revelation takes place by deeds and words, which are intrinsically connected with each other. As a result, the works performed by God in the history of salvation manifest and bear out the doctrine and realities signified by the words; while the words proclaim the works and bring to light the mystery they contain (no. 2; see nos. 4 and 14).

It is above all in the case of Jesus himself that the words and deeds of a person convey the saving self-revelation of God: "Christ established on earth the Kingdom of God [and] revealed (manifestavit) his Father and himself by deeds and words" (no. 17). It is worth noting how a year earlier *Lumen Gentium* had said something very similar, using "shines forth (elucescit)": "this kingdom [of God] shines forth before human beings in the word, works, and presence of Christ" (no. 5).

Some have interpreted this sacramental way of presenting God's saving and revealing self-communication as having an ecumenical origin. Was it a Catholic way of welcoming and joining together themes favoured by two different schools of Protestant theologians? Did *Dei Verbum* combine the language of (a) such word-of-God theologians as Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann with (b) that favoured by Oscar Cullmann, George Ernest Wright, and Wolfhart Pannenberg about God's revealing and saving acts in history? Without discounting completely this explanation, one should recall how from November 1962 Pieter Smulders began to be involved in preparing what would become *Dei Verbum*; in passages that he helped to draft one finds the language of divine revelation being mediated through "words" and "deeds."¹¹ A world-class expert on St Hilary of Poitiers, Smulders was familiar with his use of that

¹¹On Smulders's role in the preparation of *Dei Verbum*, see G. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: Three Styles of Fundamental Theology*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993, 57–62, 160–64. One should also add what Smulders communicated several months earlier to Archbishop Giuseppe Beltrami, the papal nuncio in The Hague: revelation embraces not only the "*locutio Dei*" (the revelatory word) but also the "*magnalia Dei*" (the great deeds of God). On this see Wicks, "Vatican II on Revelation," 637–50, at 643–45; this excellent article also draws attention to (a) the role of Daniélou, Rahner, Ratzinger, and other *periti* in elaborating the text of *Dei Verbum*, and provides references to (b) an outstanding series of articles by Wicks on the contribution to the Council that came from Ratzinger and Smulders (see fn. 8 above), and to (c) relevant dissertations on the Council produced by Wicks's doctoral students.

language. In the opening article of *Tractatus Mysteriorum*, Hilary wrote of the biblical “words (*dicta*)” and “facts (*facta*)” that announce (*nuntiare*)” and “express/reveal (*exprimere*)” the coming of Christ.¹² A few days before Smulders was co-opted into the work towards elaborating the constitution on revelation, Bishop Emile Guano had proposed at a plenary session of Vatican II that the “exordium” of the new “schema” on revelation should state that “God speaks to human beings through...his Word made flesh.” Christ “speaks to human beings, to begin with through his words (*dicta*) but also ...through his works (*facta*) and deeds (*gesta*), indeed through his very person.”¹³ One should also recall how the language of “words” and “works” also turned up in a paper (“On Revelation and the Word of God”) that Jean Daniélou prepared in November 1962 for Cardinal Gabriel Garrone, a member of the joint commission charged with revising the schema on “the Sources of Revelation.”¹⁴

In the event, the final text of *Dei Verbum* four times described revelation as communicated “by deeds and words” (nos. 2, 4, 14, and 15). As terms which suggest somewhat better the personal nature of revelation, “*gesta*” (twice) and “*opera*” (twice) rather than “*facta*” (only once) were used in the definitive version of the constitution. Finally, one should not overlook the way in which earlier Catholic theology had already taken up the language about revelation being mediated through “words and deeds.” Back in 1900, Herman Schell wrote of the divine revelation as follows: “the supernatural revelation of God means the free self-communication of God *through word and deed* to a personal and real community of life with the created spirit.”¹⁵ In short, a Catholic combination of two Protestant schools of thought (the word of God and the saving divine acts in history) may have contributed to the sacramental language that *Dei Verbum* used in presenting revelation. But there were other sources for this language—and not least, one must add, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

¹²*Traité des mystères*, 1.1, ed., J.-P. Brisson, *Sources Chrétiennes*, Paris: Cerf, 2005, 71.

¹³*Acta Synodalia S. Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, 1/111, Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1971, 260. In combining word and deed, Bishop Guano did not suggest that he intended to blend two (Protestant) views about the mediation of revelation and salvation.

¹⁴For details, see Wicks, “Vatican II on Revelation,” 647–50.

¹⁵H. Schell, *Katholische Dogmatik*, J. Hasenfuss, H. Petri and P. W. Scheele, ed., vol. 1, Munich: Schöningh, 1968, 28, n. 1; translation and emphasis mine.

Promulgated in December 1963, the constitution on the liturgy spoke not only of the eucharistic “mystery of faith” involving both “sacred action” and “instruction by God’s word” (no. 48) but also of the act of “celebration” and the “words” that constitute the other sacraments (no. 59). Being what Massimo Faggioli has happily called “a theological starting point” for Vatican II,¹⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* prepared the way for the sacramental language of *Dei Verbum*. This liturgical constitution also encouraged holding together “the economy of revelation” with “the history of salvation” through rehabilitating “the table of God’s word” (no. 51) alongside “the table of the Lord’s Body” (no. 48). The revealing word belongs inseparably with the saving sacrament of the Eucharist. To sum up: *Dei Verbum*’s stress on the salvific and sacramental nature of divine self-revelation applies to the broader reality of revelation what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* had already enunciated about the liturgy.

(3) A third major theme, perhaps better a major term, embodied in Chapter 1 of *Dei Verbum* is that of the divine *self-communication*: “by divine revelation God wished to manifest and *communicate himself* and the eternal decrees of his will concerning the salvation of human beings” (no. 6).¹⁷ The special value of this term comes from the way in which it holds together God’s self-revelation and self-giving through saving grace. The divine communication is not merely informative but also constitutes a real self-communication of God, which both makes salvation known and brings it in person.

Smulders had some role in the language of divine self-communication entering the final text of *Dei Verbum*.¹⁸ After the Council, this term moved further ahead in official Catholic teaching. John Paul II used it in a 1980 encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (no. 7) and then repeatedly in a 1986 encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, (nos. 13 [twice], 14, 23, 50 [four times], 51 [twice], and 58 [twice]). We saw above how Hermann Schell had written in 1900 of “the free self-communication of God,” and we find the term in the works of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Romano Guardini, Karl

¹⁶M. Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning*, 103.

¹⁷This passage echoes Vatican I and the only passage where it spoke of revelation as God’s self-revelation: “it pleased his [God’s] wisdom and goodness to reveal himself and his eternal decrees” (DzH 3004; ND 113). Where Vatican I’s constitution on faith (*Dei Filius*) spoke of God’s “revealing himself,” *Dei Verbum* doubled the verb to speak of God’s “manifesting and *communicating himself*” (emphasis added).

¹⁸O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, 52–53.

Rahner, and F.D.E. Schleiermacher. But that language had already enjoyed its place in the long history of theology. In the third part of his *Summa Theologiae*, St Thomas Aquinas endorsed a principle from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (“good diffuses itself”) to expound the incarnation as the supreme act of God’s self-communication: “it belongs to the scheme (rationem) of goodness to communicate itself to others as Dionysius shows. Hence it belongs to the scheme of the highest good to communicate itself to the creature in the highest way” (3a. 1. 1 resp..translation mine).

(4) In a fourth major theme *Dei Verbum* recognises the paschal mystery as the highpoint of divine self-revelation:

Jesus Christ...completed and perfected revelation and confirmed it with the divine witness. [He did this] by the total presence of himself and [self-] manifestation—by words and works, signs and miracles, but especially by his death and glorious resurrection from the dead, and finally by sending the Spirit of truth.

As we noted above, this article linked the climax of revelation with its saving point and purpose: Christ revealed that “God is with us, to deliver us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to eternal life” (no. 4).¹⁹

Once again *Sacrosanctum Concilium* had prepared the ground for such teaching by highlighting Easter as that “supremely solemn” of all feasts (no. 102), as well as every Sunday, when the Church celebrates “the paschal mystery,” being “the foundation and kernel of the whole liturgical year” (no. 106). The highpoint in liturgical celebration, the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, came to be acknowledged as the highpoint of his redemptive revelation. The liturgy indicated the priority of Easter for the doctrine of revelation.²⁰

(5) A fifth significant, and still sometimes contentious, teaching of *Dei Verbum* concerns the way it sets out the divine self-disclosure as being past, present, and future. We have just quoted the text of *Dei Verbum* about the *past* completing and perfecting of revelation at the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit at

¹⁹See Raúl Biord Castillo, *La Resurrección de Cristo como Revelación. Análisis del tema en la teología fundamental a partir de la Dei Verbum*, Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1998.

²⁰The language of *Dei Verbum* about “the total presence of Christ” enjoys a prior intimation in what SC taught about the pluriform presence of Christ in the liturgy (no. 7).

the first Pentecost. Nevertheless, the constitution also portrays revelation as a *present* event that invites human faith: "The obedience of faith (Rom 16:26) must be shown to God as he reveals" himself (no. 5). *Dei Verbum* associates revelation as it happened then and as it happens now in the Church: "God, who spoke in the past, uninterruptedly speaks to the spouse of his beloved Son" (no. 8). In its closing chapter the constitution cites St Ambrose of Milan to picture what happens when personal prayer accompanies the reading of sacred Scripture and a dialogue takes place between God and human beings: "we address him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles" (no. 25). Besides being completed in the past and repeatedly actualized in the present, revelation is also to be expected in the future at "the glorious manifestation of our Lord, Jesus Christ" (no. 4).

Faced with this scheme of revelation as past, *present*, and future, some are still tempted to allege that present revelation is not revelation in the proper sense but only a growth in the collective understanding of biblical revelation completed and "closed" once and for all with Christ and his apostles. Undoubtedly such a growth of understanding can and does take place. *Dei Verbum* takes up this theme:

the tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is growth in knowledge of the realities and words that are passed on...[Thus,] as the centuries go by, the Church is constantly moving towards the fullness of divine truth (no. 8).

Nevertheless, we would not do justice to tradition if we credited it only with the development in understanding of a closed and past revelation, but denied that it actualizes the revelation of God. *Dei Verbum* offers no such "low" version of tradition. The constitution interprets in the following terms the results of tradition as guided by the Holy Spirit:

Through the same tradition...the Sacred Scriptures themselves are more deeply understood and ceaselessly actualized. Thus God, who spoke in the past, speaks uninterruptedly with the spouse of his beloved Son. And the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church—and through her in the world—leads believers into all truth, and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them (no. 8).

Here the Council expresses its conviction that, through the force of tradition, the divine self-revelation recorded in the Scriptures is not only “more deeply understood” but also actualized. God continues to speak, and through the Spirit “the living voice of the gospel” never ceases to ring out.

To deny present revelation is to doubt the active power here and now of the Holy Spirit as guiding tradition and mediating the presence of the risen Christ. In effect this also means reducing faith to the acceptance of some revealed truths coming from the past rather than taking faith in its integral sense—as the full obedience personally given to God revealed here and now through the living voice of the gospel. In short to deny the revelation of God as happening also in the present is to *sell short its human correlative, faith*.

Of course, if one persists in thinking that revelation *primarily* means the communication of revealed truths, it becomes easier to relegate revelation to the past. As soon as the whole set of revealed truths is complete, revelation ends or is “closed.” For this way of thinking later believers cannot immediately and directly experience divine revelation. All they can do is remember, interpret, and apply truths revealed long ago to the apostolic Church.

Dei Verbum and other conciliar and postconciliar documents describe revelation as something which reached its full completion in the past—through “the total presence” of Christ and his self-manifestation’ (no. 4). There was content to this personal revelation, so that the constitution could refer to “the things that he [God] revealed for the salvation of all peoples” (no. 7), “the divinely revealed realities (*divinitus revelata*)” (no. 11), and “the deposit of faith” entrusted to the apostolic church and to be maintained faithfully through the tradition (no. 10). Nevertheless, *Dei Verbum* does not hesitate to speak of “hearing the Word of God” here and now (no. 1), of the obedience of faith being given to God who reveals himself in the present (no. 5), of God “continuing to converse” with the whole Church, and of the Holy Spirit ensuring that “the living voice of the Gospel” rings out in the present (no. 8). In representing the divine self-revelation in Christ as not only a matter of the past and the future but also a present reality, *Dei Verbum* once again follows what the liturgical constitution had stated.

Christ, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* explains, is actively present in the eucharistic celebration. “It is he himself,” for example, who “speaks

when the holy Scriptures are read" (no. 7). A later article adds that in the sacred liturgy "God speaks to his people and Christ is still proclaiming his Gospel" (no. 33); this is to recognise how the faithful encounter the living Word of God. To express the full scope of this personal encounter (through the past and the future, as well as in the present), the liturgical constitution cites the antiphon for the Second Vespers on the Feast of Corpus Christi (now the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ) and calls the Eucharist "a paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us" (no. 47). The complete antiphon reads: "O sacred banquet in which Christ is consumed, his suffering is remembered [from the past], the mind is filled with grace [in the present], and a pledge of future glory is given to us (*O sacrum convivium, in quo Christus sumitur, recolitur memoria passionis eius; mens impletur gratia; et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur*)." When quoting the antiphon, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* does not include "his suffering is remembered," since the same article has just spoken of the Eucharist as "a memorial of his [Christ's] Death and Resurrection." The passage from the constitution naturally highlights salvation and, specifically, the grace and glory communicated by the Eucharist. Nevertheless, it also points to revelation as past (remembering Christ's death and resurrection), as present (the mind being filled with grace), and as future (the vision of God in future glory). One might adapt the antiphon and say:

O sacred revelation, in which Christ is encountered: a revelation fully conveyed through his life, death, and resurrection (along with the sending of the Spirit) which we remember; a revelation which can here and now fill our minds through the grace of his self-disclosure; and a revelation which promises us his glorious self-manifestation to come.

One could sum up *Dei Verbum's* teaching on revelation by saying that, through Christ, it has been fully communicated in the past, that it will be consummated at the future end of history, and that it happens here and now. Revelation as present actualizes the living event of the divine self-manifestation but does not enlarge the essential content of what was completely revealed through Christ's life, death, resurrection, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Revelation continues to be an actual encounter with the self-manifesting God, but this personal dialogue adds nothing to "the divinely revealed realities" (which essentially amount to Jesus Christ

crucified, risen from the dead, and to come one day in glory, together with all that these events effect and imply). We might express the three moments of revelation by distinguishing between, but not separating, “foundational” (past) revelation, present or “dependent” revelation (which essentially depends upon foundational revelation), and future (or eschatological) revelation.²¹

(6) A sixth and final theme on revelation to be gleaned from *Dei Verbum* touches the human response to the present self-disclosure of God: the obedience of faith (no. 5) or submission to God of the whole human person. Revelation is a reciprocal event, and is not truly “there” until human beings respond with faith. In the words of the constitution, “by revelation” “the invisible God” “addresses human beings as his friends...and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company” (no. 2). In short, revelation reaches its goal when believing hearts and minds open themselves to the divine self-communication and share the life and company of God.

At the third session of the Council, Cardinal Julius Döpfner expressed the reception of faith (in a summary offered by Jared Wicks): “faith is primarily God’s work in humans to make his word of revelation effective, so that, in faith, revelation’s essence completes itself. Beyond a dialogue, faith is *participative* of and in what God reveals.”²² Together with the cardinal’s reflections, one should also cite a similar position on revelation’s essential link with faith developed by a notable Vatican II *peritus*, Joseph Ratzinger. Now that the complete edition of Ratzinger’s *Habilitationsschrift* has been published, we can see how he followed St Bonaventure. Revelation is realized only when the action of God reaches its term or intended outcome: namely faith.²³ Divine revelation exists in living subjects, those who respond with faith. In a lecture given in 1963, Ratzinger insisted that “revelation always and only becomes a reality where there is faith...revelation to some degree includes its recipient, without whom it does not exist.”²⁴

²¹On these distinctions, see G. O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology: Toward a New Fundamental Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 128–35.

²²Wicks, “Vatican II on Revelation,” 640, n. 7; see also G. Montaldi, *In fide ipsa essentia revelationis completur: Il tema della fede nell’evolversi del Concilio Vaticano II; La genesi di DV 5–6*, Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2005, at 355–60.

²³For details see Wicks, “Vatican II on Revelation,” 642, fn. 12.

²⁴J. Ratzinger, “Revelation and Tradition,” in K. Rahner and J. Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, translated by W.J. O’Hara, London: Burns & Oates, 1966, 26–49, at 36.

Human Experience and Divine Revelation

Thus far we have seen how *Dei Verbum* has yielded six clear items of teaching on revelation: it is primarily God's self-manifestation and secondarily the disclosure of new truths; it is essentially salvific and sacramental; it can be happily expressed as God's self-communication; it reached its highpoint with Christ's death and resurrection; as foundational, dependent, and eschatological, it spans past, present and future, respectively; it reaches its intended outcome in the response of human faith. The constitution has more to say (or imply) about such themes as the complex relation between revelation and tradition, and the equally complex relation between revelation and Scripture.²⁵ But let me limit myself to raising some pressing questions about human experience, the context in which the self-revelation of God takes place and yet a theme that barely makes an appearance in the constitution on revelation (nos. 8, 14) and has been widely neglected.

The Gospel of John, the letters of St Paul, the *Confessions* of St Augustine, and other classical works established and encouraged an experiential approach to understanding and interpreting the divine-human relationship. A long line of spiritual and mystical authorities examined this relationship in the key of experience. William of Saint-Thierry (1085–1148) proved one of many Christian men and women who explored in depth our spiritual experience. Nevertheless, two modern documents of the Catholic magisterium, *Dei Filius* (from Vatican I in 1870) and *Pascendi* (from Pope Pius X in 1907), warned against denying that external signs could lend credibility to divine revelation, against appealing only to the internal experience of individuals (DzH 3033; ND 127), and against making faith in God depend on the private experience of individuals and maintaining that interior, immediate experience of God prevails over rational arguments (DzH 3484). This justified opposition to one-sided and partial versions of religious experience unfortunately encouraged the dangerous delusion that somehow we could encounter and accept the divine self-revelation "outside" human experience.

The Second Vatican Council, in general, introduced sparingly the terminology of experience. The conciliar documents reflected some unease about this language. One can ascribe that inhibition to the long shadows cast by the condemnation of Modernism in the decree

²⁵See O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 190–233.

Lamentabili and the encyclical *Pascendi* (both of 1907). In condemning “modernists,” St Pius X and his collaborators showed a certain blindness to historical developments in Christianity, but were right on other scores. Some “modernists” went astray in one-sidedly emphasising religious experience. Misuse of this category should not, however, have led to ruling it out or downplaying its centrality. Yet for much of the twentieth century that was the case in the Catholic circles of many countries. Seminarians, in particular, were trained to be suspicious of “experience,” as if it were merely private, emotional, and dangerously subjective.

In 1965, *Dei Verbum* cautiously began setting the record straight at the level of official teaching. Through their special history of revelation and salvation, the Israelites “experienced the ways of God with human beings” (no. 14). In the post-New Testament life of the Church, their “experience” of “spiritual realities” has helped believers contribute to the progress of tradition (no. 8). Then followed *Gaudium et Spes*, which proved nothing less than a profound reflection on the experience of the whole human family in the light of the crucified and risen Christ. Through Christ’s revelation “the sublime calling and profound misery, which human beings experience, find their final meaning” (no. 13). Here and elsewhere the constitution set itself to correlate the light of revelation with human experience (e.g. no. 33). But it was left to a pope to feed the theme of experience directly into the bloodstream of official Catholic teaching.

With his background in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, and others of a philosophical school that aims to describing the way things, as they actually are, manifest themselves, John Paul II had no aversion to “experience” and the language of “experience.” In his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* of 1979, he introduced the noun “experience” four times and the verb ‘experience’ twice. A year later in *Dives in Misericordia*, he appealed to collective and individual experience (no. 4), and went on to use “experience” thirteen times as a noun and six times as a verb. One can readily justify the pope’s choice of terminology. If the divine self-revelation does not enter our experience (to arouse faith or strengthen

an already existing faith), it simply does not happen as far as we are concerned. Non-experienced revelation makes no sense.²⁶

Four Further Themes Left Untouched

Thus far we have examined six themes found in the teaching of *Dei Verbum* on revelation and one theme (experience) that hardly comes into view in that constitution. The first principle from the final report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod (see above) prompts me into recalling briefly what other documents of Vatican II offer, so that we might grasp the integral conciliar doctrine on God's self-revelation. Four themes suggest themselves: the human condition, the credibility of revelation, divine revelation reaching those who are not Christians, and "the signs of the times."

(1) The brief opening chapter of *Dei Verbum* did not respond to the question: who are the human beings addressed by God's self-disclosure? From the opening sentence of the constitution, one can glean that they are (potential) hearers of the divine word (art. 1). They are endowed with reason (no. 6), but need to be delivered from "the darkness of sin and death" (no. 4). For a fuller account of the human condition, we must look elsewhere: to the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) and, much more to *Gaudium et Spes*. *Nostra Aetate* presents religious faith as an answer to the fundamental questions which belong to human existence and which human beings must sooner or later face (NA 1–2). *Gaudium et Spes* dedicates its introduction to the human situation (nos. 4–10) and its opening chapter to the dignity of human persons (nos. 12–22). Here the constitution has much to say about human beings as created in the image of God, sinful yet free, and faced with the mystery of death. It declares robustly: "both the high calling and the deep misery which human beings experience find their final meaning in the light of this [Christ's] revelation" (no. 13). Elsewhere *Gaudium et Spes* has more to say about the condition of human beings who need and receive the revealing and redemptive self-communication of God.

(2) Apropos of reasons for accepting this revelation—what we might call the credibility of revelation—*Dei Verbum* has little or

²⁶See further G. O'Collins, "John Paul II and the Development of Doctrine," in G. O'Collins and M.A. Hayes, ed., *The Legacy of John Paul II*, London: Continuum, 2008, 1–16. On experience and religious experience, see O'Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, 42–55.

nothing to offer, apart from the coherent clarity of its six chapters, which resulted from debates and discussions that continued through the four sessions and three intersessions of the Council. While *Gaudium et Spes* never set itself directly to establish the credibility of God's revelation in Christ, the constitution over and over again vividly proclaims Christ as the One who answers the deepest questions and yearnings of human beings (e.g., nos. 22, 38, and 45). Secondly, it presents attractively the Church as the community founded by Christ and offering to the whole world the light and life of his message (e.g., nos. 40–43, 92–93). To this we should add that the unfolding story of the Council, convoked and opened by John XXIII and brought to a conclusion by Paul VI, caught the attention of the world and did not leave untouched many people who hungered for religious meaning and nourishment. In that sense, the whole event of Vatican II provided reasons for finding a believable creed in what the Christian Church proclaims about the divine self-revelation in Christ.

(3) A third crucial issue, left untouched in *Dei Verbum*, enquires about divine revelation reaching the religious "others," those who have not heard the Christian message or have not yet found reasons for accepting it. The final article of its chapter on revelation briefly repeats the teaching of Vatican I about the knowledge of God being available through the created world (no. 6), but does not develop what this might mean for the many millions who follow other religious faiths. Here four documents of Vatican II step in to provide new, official teaching about the possibility of responding in faith to the divine self-revelation: *Lumen Gentium* (nos. 16 and 17), *Nostra Aetate*, the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*) (esp. Ch. 1), and *Gaudium et Spes* (various articles). Once again we find the first document approved by the Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, leading the way. It initiated this concern for the religious others and displayed a mindset open to the salvation of the world.²⁷

(4) Finally, *Gaudium et Spes* proposed that "the signs of the times" (Mt 16:3) and "the voices of our age" (no. 44) can convey God's intentions. Discerning the signs of the times belongs with the call to open oneself to the full scope of the present, "dependent" divine revelation, which also reaches us through the Church's liturgy and

²⁷For details on what these five conciliar texts say about "the religious others," see my *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

scriptures, through public and private prayer, and through many other experiences, both individual and collective.²⁸ John XXIII had introduced the theme of the signs of the times in his 1962 "bull" convoking Vatican II, *Humanae Salutis*, and a year later in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (nos. 126–29). *Gaudium et Spes* picked up this theme: "the Church carries the responsibility of scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (no. 4). It is the whole people of God, led "by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the whole world," who try "to discern" "in the events, the needs, and the longings that it shares with other human beings of our age," what "may be true signs of the presence or of the purpose of God" (no. 11).

To conclude, *Dei Verbum* merits its place at the head of the four constitutions promulgated by the Second Vatican Council. In particular, its doctrine of the divine self-revelation in Christ offers the primary key for understanding all the conciliar documents. Nevertheless, it is only by interpreting this constitution in the context of the other fifteen documents that will make us grasp the integral teaching of the Council on the self-manifestation of the Word of God.

²⁸ On discerning the signs of the times, see G. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, 2nd edn.; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986, 102–07.